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SHIKI
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小野不由美
新潮文庫

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sinnesspiel

1

On the very day Gotouda Fuki's funeral services ended, Seishin slipped from the graveyard to pay a visit to the Ozaki clinic. The lights were out in the waiting room. Instead, the light in the window facing the courtyard was lit. On the first floor of the main house, the nearest window was Toshio's bedroom.

Maneuvering around the garden trees, avoiding the shrubbery, he went into the yard. Through the lace curtains he could see TToshio's room which he had become used to coming and going from. It was a western style room that was once a parlor. Toshio's bedroom was moved from a room on the second floor to this one sometime during grade school, wasn't it? It was many times larger than his bedroom on the second floor had been it it seemed like Toshio had some lingering affection for the second story. --Indeed, the move wasn't Toshio's will. The reason for why Takae suddenly moved Toshio's room to there, Seishin understood immediately even as a child. Even that night night feeling a pang of guilt that he'd harbored since then, Seishin tapped on the glass. Toshio, sitting back on the bed, looked up and jerked his chin in a motion for him to enter.

"---Yo."

The room was jumbled, a collection of Toshio's life history gathered within. The bed that hadn't been moved once since he was a child, a writing desk. The books on the shelves changed from reference books to medical journals, the contents of his lowboard went from idle collectables and records to bottles of western liquor but as the change was gradual, it didn't feel uncomfortable.

"Want a drink?"

Toshio motioned lightly to his glass, then opened the refrigerator, only household good he'd gained since succeeding the house. Without waiting for Seishin's response, he put ice into an extra glass.

"---And? What's up."

Toshio's voice as he poured the liquor and added water was oozing with an air

of nonchalance. Seishin hesitated to speak, and for a while, without a word, he looked troubled at his glass. Toshio made a deliberately calm face, turning his eyes with disinterest towards the program on TV as he lit a cigarette.

"...Hey, what's happening in the village?"

"What do you mean what?"

"Shuuji-san, the three in Yamairi, Megumi-chan, Giichi-san, Fuki-san. ---For a single summer, don't you think that's too many dead?"

Toshio's voice was blunt. "Last summer there were four people. Who died. If we're talking about what's too many, it's probably about three. In the summer old people's bodies give out. Even more if they're older with a chronic disease. The heat this year's been harsher than usual, too."

"That's not what I'm saying." How many people died last summer, or even the year before that, couldn't be unknown information to Seishin who was none other than a monk."Certainly, there are plenty of older people in the village like Gigorou-san who are in bad condition. There's no lack of bedridden elders like Giichi-san, either. Those elderly dying may be ordinary enough for the year. But how many like Shuuji-san die in the prime of their life? Accidents aside, from illness?"

Toshio's voice as he responded was unnecessarily flippant.

"Shuuji-san's at the right age for adult diseases. Malignant tumors, heart failure, cerebral hemorrhages, the so called sudden death, suddenly dying off isn't something unheard of."

"Then, Megumi-chan? --Of course, it's not unheard for for someone young to suddenly die of a disease. That's been what's happening and will likely be what keeps happening But, it's been at most half a month that we've had this many in a row. Is this what you would call common?

Fuki-san, too, was at the age where something happening at any time wouldn't be strange. She herself was aware of that and had made voluntary arrangements for her own burial plot. For Fuki-san, if she only died after a quick striking illness, that might have really been a good thing. There isn't anything especially strange. --But, only half a month before that, her son died. A healthy middle aged man in

the prime of his life, with a sound body, and without any particular chronic illnesses. He suddenly died, and half a month later his mother suddenly dies. Both without time for hospitalization, true sudden death. Is that something that happens a lot?"

"It's not like it's impossible, is it? With her son dead, an old aged mother'd be heartbroken."

"And if before her son died, her blood brother died?"

Seishin stared at Toshio, Toshio intentionally keeping watch over the TV.

"The Murasako's Hidemasa, too, was at an age where something happening wouldn't be strange. If Hidemasa-san alone had suddenly died, even I wouldn't have any doubts about it. The same for Gigorou-san, and the same for Mieko-san. But three people did, ---and on top of that, three people who lived in the same community, all died at once? Directly after that, his nephew in the prime of his life suddenly died, and half a month later his sister died. Each and every one of them were without the immediate care of a physician, without knowing if anything was wrong with any of them anywhere, without treatment or rest, just the sudden conclusion. Are you going to tell me that those are ordinary circumstances?"

Toshio didn't answer. As if bothered by the smoke from his own cigarette, he only furrowed his brows.

"As separate cases, indeed, there isn't anything suspicious. Elders die often enough, and it isn't unheard of for the young to die suddenly. Each one alone, or even if there were only two, could be thought of like that. But, when the numbers come out to this much, and in a row. Isn't there a meaning to it if they're serialized?"

"What are you saying it means?"

"....it isn't a plague, is it?"

At Seishin's inquiry, Toshio's gaze tore from the TV as he turned to face Seishin. He pushed his cigarette into the ash tray.

"That's an old style way of saying it." With a faint smile, he turned down the volume on the TV and brought out a stack of documents from beneath the low

table. He placed them on top of the table. "Indeed, there have been a lot have deaths this summer."

Toshio folded his hands over the documents.

"Even taking into account how many old people there are and the heat, it's abnormal. Within about half a month, seven people, just out of the ones I know, are dead. Ohkawa Gigorou, Murasako Hidemasa, Murasako Mieko, Gotouda Shuuji, Shimizu Megumi, Yasumori Giichi, Gotouda Fuki, ---in short, seven people."

Seishin nodded.

"Last year all year how many deaths do you think there were? Our of just the people I know, it's eight. Five I wrote out death certificates for, the other three were transferred to the hospital in Mizobe and a report came in to me of their deaths. There may be more deaths I didn't have any business with, but at most there were as few as ten deaths or about. Even if we have a few more old people than the national regional average, that was the situation last year. Regardless of that, this August, and just in half of that month, we've already had a death count vigorously approaching one year's. Just the rise in numbers is abnormal. This isn't a normal situation."

"....Aa."

"It's not just a problem of numbers. I don't know Shuuji-san's cause of death. I wrote acute heart failure down at face value but if you say it honestly, it's cause of death unknown. Same for Gigorou-san, same for Hidemasa-san. Megumi-chan. Fuki-san. Five people died suddenly, and we're not very clear on that cause of death. For Mieko baa-san, there was a police autopsy but after all it was hard to say a precise cause. If you want one you could say there's nothing suspicious about, Giichi-san would be about it." Toshio lightly tapped the stack of documents. "No matter how you think about it, it's abnormal. And Shuuji-san is Hidemasa-san's nephew. Fuki-san was Shuuji-san's mother. The three in Yamairi were living together like a family. Of the six people who met with an unclear death, the only one without a connection to the other dead is Megumi, otherwise all of them had a close connection with each other. This undefinable death sparks off to people nearby. Indeed---I can only think of it as contagious."

Seishin exhaled deeply. It was a strain holding onto unease as nothing more than unease. Indeed it was true that it was a relief to have it make opaque but having it clarified like this meant the worst for the village.

"If it's an epidemic, it's a serious matter."

The people of the village had intimate connections, complicated like a meshed net. And the drainage system was far from complete. Kanemasa had been a backer and there was supplementary assistance from the city towards establishing a septic system but some portion of water for daily living even now was drawn from the river. Even with a waterworks system established, many villagers still used underground water in some form or another, and in the mountains, people drew drinking water from the swamp. But, in the mountains that encircled the village, there were spatterings of graveyards about. Even now the dead were buried there.

Seishin pointed that out, and Toshio lightly shook his head.

"If it's an epidemic. --But, that's not for sure yet."

"But."

"Don't rush ahead of yourself," Toshio said in a low, flat tone. "It's not good to make predictions. Things being what they are, if we embrace any weird predictions, there's the serious possibility it'll slow us down on grasping what the real situation is."

"Aa---that's right, my mistake."

"It looks like an epidemic but we can't say for sure. We can't put a name to the disease. At least for now, no epidemics that fit the symptoms come to mind. Unidentified is the true state of things. It might be a contagion, and it might not be. Thinking about it it might be a virus, it might be bacteria, we're completely in the mist about it. There's the possibility of it being a parasite, or the possibility that it's a mass poisoning. What we do know is that something unusual is happening, that's where we're at."

Seishin nodded.

"The question now is whether something's happening or not. Why have there

been so many deaths, that's what we have to grasp."

From within the pile of documents, Toshio sought and dug out the clinical records.

"Megumi-chan's house call was on August 22nd. Megumi-chan fell the day before that on the 21st. She was found collapsed after a mountain hunt, and since then had been in bad condition, so I think we can think of her outbreak as being on on the 21st. Before that, there wasn't anything particularly wrong. At the least, her family didn't see anything wrong with her, and she herself wasn't claiming any complaints. Thinking that was strange, the family called me on the night of the 22nd, and it was three days after that she died. Four days after the outbreak. By the way Megumi-chan, when I saw her, didn't look at all from any angle like a patient three days from death."

"Right...."

"Aside from anemia, Megumi-chan didn't have anything else that could be seen as wrong with her. Why did she suddenly end up dying is, to be honest, something I don't know." Toshio threw out Megumi's clinical records on the table, lit a cigarette and exhaled smoke. "There's a danger of an epidemic. That's something I'm not denying. If on the off chance it is one, there's the possibility it'll become serious. That's why we need to investigate to understand the true state of things but that's a difficult problem."

"It's a difficult problem?"

Toshio nodded.

"The last time I saw Megumi-chan, she was incredibly lethargic, like just talking was tiring but she herself didn't seem to be aware of anything being out of order. That's probably how it was. Aside from the anemia, there wasn't anything special wrong with her. Pain, fever, if there was anything that could be assessed that was unusual, or even if the patient seemed off, I'd have been anxious. But, just being tired or easily worn out isn't something to consult a doctor for a diagnosis over. If those are the first symptoms of this illness, we're in trouble."

Knowing what he was trying to say, Seishin nodded. "Aa, that's true. Feeling sluggish and all is a common thing. Even thinking there might be a temperature and measuring it to find out there isn't one really does happen a lot."

"Right. There's nobody who'd come rushing into the hospital over that, and we wouldn't be able to take it if they did come in over just that."

"All the more because the patient would know that. They look for the precise cause. A cold, every day fatigue, drinking too much, maybe those were the cause, they would think of every day occurrences. If that became even worse, they'd first probably lie down for a rest, doubting whether or not to consult a doctor."

"That's how it is. The patient doesn't feel anything's wrong. I can sleep it off, is how they think of it. Even so the battle with this illness is over quick. By all rights, there's no time to hesitate."

While hesitating another dead body with an imprecise death would appear. All Toshio could see was an indistinct dead body. There wasn't time to see how it progressed or run any tests. This was how the situation progressed in reality. If Shimizu hadn't had Megumi seen by Toshio, there would have been nothing seen in it by Seishin and the others other than another case of the "inexplicable serial sudden deaths."

"This starts out incredibly casual." Toshio stirred through the documents without aim. "Megumi-chan's started with anemia. I don't know about Gigorou-san or Hidemasa-san but Mieko baa-san came to the hospital just a little bit before those two died, saying they weren't well, that it was probably a summer cold."

"I heard the same thing when Shuuji-san died She thought it was a summer cold or that the summer heat was getting to him, Fuki-san was saying."

"I heard it too. A summer cold without a fever, Fuki-san said, Mieko baa-san said it too. In short, sluggish, without an appetite, and poor complexion. What or how they can't say but somehow they just don't look right, in other words. It's possible that might be from anemia after all, or maybe there's some way it appears besides anemia. At any rate, anemia sets in and it starts with trivial symptoms. From there, withina few days it suddenly gets much worse. You could even say drastic."

"Mieko-san had liver failure, right?"

"Right. The two old guys in Yamairi, Shuuji-san, and Megumi-chan are unclear.

Fuki-san might have had acute renal failure. Uremia from renal failure, and that's the cause of death, I'd been thinking. Giichi-san may be the exception but anyway, he had aspiration pneumonia. Those are all the cards in my hand. Even though seven people've died."

Seishin groaned in his throat. Toshio needed detailed data but the early stages of it were just too trivial, the patient themselves would have no sense of impending danger. If they didn't come into the hospital, clinical data couldn't be assembled. That said, if they had the public offices spread the concern, with it starting as trivially as it did, everyone and anyone would flood the hospital and a panic would be unavoidable.

As if reading Seishin's thoughts, Toshio murmured. "Making a stupidly honest announcement of the situation would just be dangerous with no benefits. Tired, no appetite, worn out easily, if people came into the hospital over just that, the hospital'll be paralyzed. And that's not all, in the event it really is an epidemic, the hospital itself wouldn't be able to help becoming a source of contamination."

"But we can't leave it as it is can we? Anyway, at the point something feels off, we need to have them come in."

"We can't take it," Toshio sighed. "For those who've contracted it, we don't want them to think of it as nothing, but to look at it more seriously and come to the hospital. We want the patients who haven't contracted it not to make a pointless fuss and get neurotic. But whether they've contracted it or not the patient themselves wouldn't know."

Seishin nodded. "But, for the time being I think that there's a need to call attention to it. There are many whose physical conditions are deteriorating, so be aware; if we don't at least say that much, then..."

"Just thinking about what it's going to bring on is a pain in the ass but that's all we can do. We'll have to get the public office to cooperate with us, huh?" Toshio breathed a deep sigh. "We'll consult with the public health official Ishida-san, and spread it through the public office to get things under way. At any rate, that's the only way we even can start."

sinnesspiel

2

The formerly independent village of Sotoba was now annexed into the town of Mizobe. That town of Mizobe had a Health Department in place but Sotoba's own health department was in the public office---that is, the public office bore the Sotoba branch of the city Health Department. Each community had an official who served at the public office as the health official as well. That said, the only one in charge of it all was Ishida. Basically Ishida worked according to instruction from Mizobe, dolling out orders to each community health official, nothing more than a messenger from the governing to the governed; with no particular specialized knowledge, he was an office worker through and through. On the one in a thousand chance that an epidemic was starting to spread, of course it would be too much for Ishida alone.

On the night of August the twenty third, Seishin and Toshio called Ishida to the temple and explained the situation. At first Ishida seemed to be in half doubt but upon receiving Toshio's explanation, his pallor changed.

"Last summer, four people died. Two in June, one in August and September each. To be precise, those are all the dead that I personally oversaw. The death in August was from a heart attack. For a year, well, that's about normal. On the other hand this year all at once, seven. August isn't even over yet but a in simple comparison of the dead up until now with last year's one, we have a surplus of seven or six people."

"Surplus..."

Toshio nodded.

"Not the best wording but the numbers are clearly too high for a normal death toll is what I'm saying. Now, looking at the raw numbers of the situation and that we have six more than last year wouldn't be anything to make a fuss over. Without a statistical analysis there's no way I can say anything definitive but all

the same six people is enough to certainly call abnormal."

That's right, said Ishida with a dumbfounded nod.

"This August, it's certain something's happening in the village. It's causing the abnormal surplus of deaths. Sotoba's an incredibly tiny place, but just the same in one season alone there've been seven. On top of that, most of them were unexpected sudden death by some internal cause. Since it's come to this, it shouldn't be by any means unreasonable to suspect we have a mass outbreak of some kind of disease or another."

Yes, said Ishida wiping at his sweat with his handkerchief. It was an abnormally sultry night. The air was thick and stagnant, the tepid humidity rising. The glass of beer sat in front of Ishida was beaded with drops of water, the foam completely gone.

"But at the same time we're far off from being anywhere near knowing what's actually happening. All I can say about where we are now is that it starts with trivial symptoms, symptoms that while they aren't even aware of it themselves takes a dramatic turn for the worst into sudden death, is what it comes down to. And that it has a trend of spreading like fire to those nearby. If nothing else, I think it's certain it's spreading."

Ishida stared at Toshio with dependent eyes.

"It isn't yet a certainty that it's an epidemic, right?"

"I can't say anything definitive. But, if we cling to wishful thinking, then in the one in a million chance it is an epidemic, we won't get that lost time back. I think it's better to be vigilant as if assuming it is an epidemic."

"But, you know." Ishida patted his forehead with his handkerchief. "If you carelessly throw around the word epidemic..."

"That's the problem," Toshio sighed. "It's gonna be the worst. If rumor of a contagion spreads there the village there'll be a panic. The initial symptoms are too trivial and common, if they lose their cool, then the hospital's functionally paralyzed. It's not definitely a contagious disease but in the case that it is, if the patients march in on the hospital when we don't know the illness or the infection route, it's not just a bother it's a danger. I'd like to minimize that possibility as

much as we can, if possible."

Ishida nodded.

Sotoba was dependent on the Ozaki Hospital. In a mountain village of merely 1,319 people, having a proper hospital at all in itself was a rarity. Sotoba had been blessed with such all this time, so that was all the more reason that their faith in the Ozaki Hospital was so high. The people in the village had a certain sense of duty practically taken on through osmosis that they wouldn't go to another hospital without a referral by Ozaki, so all the more reason that if rumors started of a plague, the villagers would mostly flood the Ozaki Hospital without a doubt.

"But.... But then, what should we...."

Seeing Ishida's dismay, Seishin explained.

"Could not a notice be passed about through you, Ishida-san, as the public health official? Phrased as if lately there have been many suffering summer fatigue and to be cautious."

"Circulating a notice is simple enough but..."

"If you think that someone has become fatigued, do not rely on a layperson's judgement and go to the doctor, it would say."

Toshio nodded.

"In the first place in the summer there're plenty who just take in drinks and lose their appetites. Couldn't you say the summer heat's still pretty stringent, so for the time being take in three square meals a day, don't diet excessively? Even a simple 'mind your health''ll be fine. If we do that then at least as much as it'll actually protect against simple ailments, it'll be useful in sieving out a few patients."

"Yes, yes, ---that's true." Ishida wiped at his sun burnt neck. "But, will just that be enough? If we don't take some concrete measures to stop the spread of the infection..."

"Even if we try to take some concrete measures at our current level we don't have any measures to take. At best, all we'd have is don't drink well water, try to

bring a canteen with you when going into the mountains, and mind what you're washing your hands and gargling with. Make too loud of a fuss and that'll just be poking the bush with a stick."

"Haa..."

"That's why for the time being the only way we can start is with gathering data. The bunch in the village won't let you touch a corpse. Forget doing a pathological autopsy, they disapprove of even drawing blood after death. If they don't come into the hospital before they become a corpse, we can't even get a grasp on what's happening in the village."

"Yes--yes, that's right."

"There's no choice but to collect the data this way, compile it, then have the administration act on it. It's true enough that if it really does turn out to be an epidemic, it's going to be too much for us."

"Wouldn't it be better for me to pass this report up to the prefecture health department or the city health center?"

"You can try it I guess. But right now without a name to put to the disease, the government won't move. What those guys call an epidemic isn't something spreading around to the people; for them it's a word for an existing contagious disease written into the protocol or manuals. Unless the situation really gets huge, we probably can't count on any support. They can't do anything themselves. If you wanted to hurry it, there's the possibility of saying for example that food poisoning or hepatitis is spreading, but if I get an inquiry from the public office, I can't exactly give fake disease report."

"Th, that's indeed true."

"Anyway I'll collect the data. All we can do is get solid proof if something is spreading, then leave it to Kanemasa to get things moving," Toshio said, his face scrunching. "So I say but while the predecessor was one thing, I dunno if it's all right to rely on that old guy that much or not, but...."

Ishida nodded without really thinking. The previous generation of the Kanemasas, as well as the one before that had served as the village headmen and had been experienced, influential people. That predecessor died last year,

and now his son was a member of the Diet but compared to the vigor of his predecessor, he was hopelessly flaky.

"It'd have been better if the predecessor were alive for us." Ishida murmured, then suddenly: "Come to think of it, the Kanemasa predecessor also died suddenly, didn't it?"

Toshio suddenly made a complicated expression as if something bitter had been tossed into his mouth.

"Yeah, but----. No matter how you stretch it, that's probably not related, right? We're talking last July, I'm sure. That was a year ago."

"There is that but. Well, I mean, you know."

"Anyway, in order to collect data first we need patients to come to the hospital."

"Yes, indeed. I understand."

"In the mean time, Ishida-san, this summer's---yeah, since July, I want the list of those who've died since then. There might've been deaths amongst those who weren't my patients, too. If there were, I'd like copies of their death certificates too, but."

Ishida nodded.

"I'll see what I can do tomorrow. At the latest I will have them prepared by the day after tomorrow. My jurisdiction is over demographics but I'll see what I can do about compiling them quickly for that period."

"The day after tomorrow's fine. But, definitely by the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

sinnesspiel

3

The day after Toshio met with Ishida, it was abnormally sultry. Of the patients who came into the hospital, all of them were conspicuously weary. At any rate, it seemed like a shower was approaching. In the midsts of that, from the Monzen Yasumori family came Nao. The instant Nao entered the examining room, Toshio had a feeling.

What is it, Toshio asked as a formality, though Nao's complexion was clearly poor, and indeed she looked worn down. Even if the fatigue was the same, there was something different from the patients suffering from the heat and the humidity. Nao moved her lips faintly as if to answer but even that seemed to be too much and stopped.

"What's up? You look tired." While pushing her again for a response, Toshio took Nao's hand. She was powerless and felt cool to the touch. Her pulse was pretty fast but not enough to qualify as tachycardia. Peering at her face up close, those eyes of hers had the impression of someone somehow possessed. It was the way her conjunctiva was so blueish.

"I'm tired... My mother-in-law said I had to go to the hospital no matter what, so."

"I see. Doesn't look like you have a fever, does it? So with that, it probably isn't a cold. When did you start feeling like this?"

"Yesterday... No, this morning."

"Which one?"

"This morning, as soon as I woke up I was very tired. It was hot at night so I didn't sleep well... But, my mother-in-law asked me I don't know how many times since yesterday if I was all right."

Toshio tilted his head. She was talking strangely.

"And Nao-san yourself, you didn't think you felt particularly sluggish at any point yesterday?"

"...I don't know. If I have to say it one way or another I think I had the feeling I was tired. ... Like, my head was heavy. I was dazed."

"Looks like it," Toshio nodded. "Any shortness of breath or palpitations?"

While asking he took her pulse. Her blood pressure was a little weak, so he couldn't get it clearly by touch.

"No, yes,.... I don't really know."

"Did you eat?"

Her voice answering that she hadn't seemed to die out. Lifting up her eyelid to look at the membrane, the color was faint. Her nails were white, and just to be sure he had her open her mouth to confirm that her oral cavity too had lost its healthy reddish color. It was similar---to Megumi's.

"Dizziness when you stand?"

"Yes, some."

"Your period's been regular, right? Are you menstruating now?"

Yes, Nao nodded.

"That's good. Looks like you have a case of anemia," Toshio said, then added on. "Just in case let's do a full examination. Do you have any other pains anywhere?"

"No... not really."

Really, Toshio murmured, telling Nao to head into the other examining room and strip. He instructed the nurse Kiyomi to take her height, weight, pulse, blood pressure and temperature.

While he was seeing other patients, Kiyomi finished taking the measurements. Her blood pressure was pretty low, her pulse pretty high. There was a slight fever but, at any rate nothing abnormal.

At a glance her skin was losing its healthy glow but she wasn't particularly jaundiced and had no particular purple spots. Her nails and tongue seemed

normal, and there was nothing abnormal about her hair.

"Raise both your knees if you could. ---Any problems going to the bathroom or difficulties passing urine?"

"No..."

Nodding, he felt the lower region of her liver. Nothing felt abnormal.

"Nothing unusual about the color? A brownish color or a reddish color or..."

"...I don't think so."

Nao's responses sounded incredibly labored. While asking her medical, life and family history, he performed palpations. There were no particular signs of a swollen spleen, the lymph nodes at her neck and underarm were slightly swollen. Listening with a stethoscope, there were no particular disruptive sounds in her heart or veins. ---As expected, it looked like simple anemia.

"I think it's anemia, but," Toshio stated while instructing her to put her clothes on. "Still, since anemia can occur due to internal bleeds, I'd like to do an X-ray, is that all right?"

Nao nodded, so he gave instructions to Kiyomi.

"An X-ray of the chest and abdomen. Also, run a blood and urine test. Take enough for us to run an analysis here. And a bone marrow sample."

"Bone marrow? From the sternum?" Kiyomi blinked.

"Mm. And then take a sample for a peripheral smear too." Bearing the questioning gaze of Kiyomi, Toshio gave a smile to Nao. "I'll be taking a little bone marrow sample. It might hurt a little, but it's not really a scary test or anything. Anyway, for today we'll run the labs and prescribe some vitamins, so come back in three days. But," Toshio added on firmly. "If tomorrow morning, you feel more tired than today or you have a fever or you feel anything's going wrong, come in tomorrow. Got that?"

Nao nodded but her face was indifferent. She looked like it was somebody else's business. It seemed like she wasn't feeling any distress at all but maybe it was weighing on her.

Watching over Nao as she was urged into the treatment room by Kiyomi,

Yasuyo quietly called to him.

"Doctor--is it something bad?"

Nah, Toshio shrugged his shoulders. "If it was bad, I'd refer her to the national hospital. This's just in case."

"But."

He waved a hand to stop what Yasuyo was going to say. "If it was just a cold or just nephritis, I wouldn't be watching it this close. It looks like Nao-san is showing signs of anemia. And 'just anemia' at that. If that's the case it's nothing to get neurotic about. ---But, Megumi-chan was like that."

Yasuyo nodded, with an understanding look. "You don't want to have any regrets."

"That is correct."

"Tanaka-san, I'm sorry but could I ask a favor of you?"

Tanaka Yoshikazu blinked as the health department's Ishida asked of him. Ishida suddenly said he'd wanted to know the deaths that had come in since July. It wasn't the right time of year for a demographic survey, and the time for the month's census was long past. When he tried to ask the reason, his words were unclear and not very satisfying but at any rate he nodded.

"You'd like me to prepare the names of the deceased and make copies of their death notices, then. In secret?"

"It isn't anything especially suspicious. There was something bothering me that I wanted to investigate is all. It isn't something to make a fuss over so if you could do it without drawing attention to it."

Tanaka nodded and during the lunch break when the branch office staff were all out, at his own discretion he took the death notices out of the binders. With a dry sound, a water droplet splattered against the public office's window. The moisture that had been building all morning at last passed the saturation point and fell as drops of water---that was the impression Tanaka had. Large drops of rain scattered, soon changing into a shower that sounded like water in the

bottom of a bucket. It was shaping up to be the rain they were long overdue. The public office devoid of any signs of anyone else quickly grew dark.

Tanaka brought the binder back to his own desk. The one in the top binder was Shimizu Ryuuji. Tanaka didn't know that man. Fourty one years old, his death certificate was issued from Mizobe's General Hospital. Before that was an old woman named Gotouda Fuki. Before that was Ohtsuka Yasuyuki.

Without thinking much of it, Tanaka gazed at the face. It was the Ohtsuka sawmill's son. He was in a different mourning group but as he lived right next door to him, Tanaka himself had attended his service.

(Come to think of it, this year there have been serial funerals...)

Before Otsuka Yasuyuki, Shimizu Megumi had died. The one beneath the death certificate of the old woman man who died in Monzen was Megumi's. She was his daughter's childhood friend, a year older, just a tenth grader. He had sympathies for the Shimizu household for their despondency but his daughter's grief over losing her friend was terrible, too.

Before that the three people in Yamairi died, which had been a big fuss. Three old people died---.

Tanaka's hands stopped over the binder. What Ishida said he had wanted to investigate was this, he thought. Yes, it was clear there were too many deaths.

Before Shimizu Megumi was the young man in Naka-Sotoba, and the three old people in Yamairi. Before that somebody in Kami-Sotoba had died. This was all since August started.

(...This many?)

Tanaka was in charge of the family register and certificates of residency but in practice whoever was free manned the front window to take any report for processing. The Sotoba office was small. In all it was a six person organization. Even if their areas of duty were defined, that was how things were, so he hadn't noticed. But, for just coming into August, these numbers were abnormal.

Tanaka felt like the blood was being drawn from him as he turned the pages of the binder. Before the death in Kami-Sotoba, an old man in Sotoba, was on July 3rd. It was at the Mizobe National Hospital where he died of esophagus cancer,

and it had been five months before that without a death.

Something unusual was happening. Starting at the beginning of August.

Tanaka gathered the files and called Ishida from the staff members who were having lunch in the locker room. He must have noticed Tanaka's expression, as Ishida's face stiffened as he came out.

"Ishida-san, here."

Ishida expressed his thanks and took the pile of copies. Ishida looked at Tanaka's imploring expression.

"Ishida-san, is something happening?" Tanaka asked in a quiet voice. In the sounds of the rain like an earthly tremor, thunder crashed. "Since the beginning of August, what's happening to this village? Is this what Ishida-san wanted to investigate?"

"How many people was it?"

"It's ten."

Ishida looked over Tanaka's stiff expression. It was far more than he imagined.

"Tanaka-san, I understand your feelings. But where we're at right now, I can't say anything. At any rate, we are taking appropriate measures."

"But...."

Ishida stared into Tanaka's eyes, brimming with fear.

"Please keep this close to the breast. You understand, don't you? If this leaks out, it will become bigger. In exchange I will tell you of our progress. Just as I've asked you today, from now on can I ask you for copies of any death certificates that come in?"

Tanaka, swallowing down his breath, nodded.

"Oh, is it coming down?"

Hasegawa asked this of the young man who entered the shop.

Yuuki turned to look at the window. That said, creole had but one window, and it was stained glass. It wasn't one through which you could see the scenery beyond the window but outside of the window was dark. In between the BGM

the sounds of the rain striking could be heard.

"It's turning out to be a real downpour," the young man laughed, putting down his case beside the counter. "Here's the voucher. Is there anything else?"

Just a moment, Hasegawa said as he headed into the kitchen coming back with a memo.

"I'll leave this to you. It has the numbers written down. Where's Mikami-kun today?"

"Mikami-kun's quit. Since he'd moved all of a sudden."

"Heh? Last week when he came by, he didn't say anything about that."

The young man nodded. "That's right. It was really sudden. Quitting as suddenly as that was a burden on everyone, actually."

"I'd bet," Hasegawa said, throwing away the packing tape. "Things being what they are. Be careful driving back."

Thank you, the young man said flashing white teeth and leaving the store. As the door opened and closed, the sound of the rainfall drifted in even more strongly.

"It is coming down hard," Yuuki said as Hasegawa, case in hand, turned his eye to the window.

"It's been so humid. With this it should start to cool off some. About time, I say."

"It will be nice if it does," Hirosawa said with a wry smile. "Until now we've missed out on the rain after all."

Hirosawa was at the counter with an open text book and notebook. It was August twenty fourth. He must have been preparing for the new school term. Beside him, as usual the bookstore owner Tashiro was having a late lunch.

"Really," Hasegawa said with an exaggerated sigh. "I wonder what to make of this year's summer season. Not much rain, oppressive heat. Heatstroke was it, I believe? Somebody in Mizobe had died of it. A person working at the JA warehouse had died, it said in the newspaper."

Yuuki's face scrunched without thinking. The word dead, in regards to a person, somehow hit close to him. Just the day before, he had just come out of the funeral service for his mourning group for Gotouda Fuki. Thinking back, the first time he had come into creole had been after a funeral. Fuki's son's funeral---his first time participating in his mourning crew. The old woman who slouched into the the chief mourner's seat was half a month later buried near her son.

Yuuki let out a light sigh.

"Somehow... it's like there's a lot of deaths." As Yuuki spoke, Hasegawa, Hirosawa, and at last Tashiro looked to him. "Is this just how it goes?"

In the town Yuuki had lived in, there hadn't been that many deaths in a row. In a mere half a month, Gotouda Shuuji, Fuki, and Shimizu Megumi made three funerals Yuuki had attended. And there was the incident in Yamairi. As the deceased were old people who lived in Yamairi, it had nothing to do with Yuuki and Yuuki's mourning crew but, he had heard that Gotouda Fuki's brother had died. In half a month four houses, six people dead seemed a bit too much. Especially when thinking of the population, this rate wasn't something he thought could be normal.

"It isn't quite how it goes, but," Hirosawa said with a forced smile. "It's just it's something that happens, you could say, as there are, fundamentally, many elderly. When the weather changes, it is common to see a line of deaths in a row, often enough."

On top of that, Hasegawa laughed. "The population is small here, and the relationships between people are intimate, so if somebody or anybody from anywhere dies, it will spread around before you know it. There are the mourning groups, and if there's a funeral nearby it isn't like "who died?" or anything. Not like it is in the city."

"Ah, certainly."

"But well, it does feel like there have been a lot of deaths. In truth, in regards to the size of the population, it is a lot, isn't it? Since it's all elderly out here."

Hirosawa nodded. "Mysteriously, the thing which we call death comes in rows. Once the mourning group sets out, it feels like they've just been out, the saying goes. Once that ceases, for a while nothing will happen, and then again another

run of them. It's akin to---it's like a wave."

Indeed, Hasegawa and Tashiro agreed.

"There's some polarization to it," Tashiro nodded enthusiastically. "In a given season, a mourning group's duties will keep coming, and even though we're running about like crazy, the neighboring group is quiet and tranquil."

"Heh?"

Hasegawa smiled. "True, I mean, it's been rather long time no see with my local mourning group. To begin with, I've only participated in a mourning group once myself. Since moving to Sotoba."

"Is that right."

"It was when I'd first moved in, and only once. Before we moved, my wife's father died, so that's two all together. For that I wasn't particularly involved with the mourning crew. In regards to mourning groups, Yuuki-san has become more experienced than myself."

Is that how it is, Yuuki thought. Hirosawa smiled softly.

"I, too, haven't seen the mourning group in some time. When we set out for Shuuji-kun's case, it had been five years. Since the one before that was my mothers funeral. It was consecutive at that time, too. To be sure, it's unusual for it to be within half a month but in about one month's time two houses had them in a row. As soon as I thought it wouldn't continue, next it was my own mother's turn. They were drawing each other along, I'd thought then. "

"Drawing each other?"

Hirosawa nodded. "The one who died before my mother was a person my mother had gotten along with. They were lonely and called my mother to join them, I thought. Drawing her to that world..."

"Ah, so pulling along, you mean."

"That's superstition though. It's just, grief is something that comes in cycles. Though that kind of explanation feels completely ridiculous. It isn't a theory, it's a feeling."

Hasegawa spoke as if laden with a particular emotion. "Shuuji-san may have pitied his mother he left behind and pulled her to him."

Hirosawa forced a smile. "Though we know that couldn't be, in our heads. Murasako's Hidemasa-san pulled along his beloved nephew, and the pulled along Shuuji-san pulled his mother who had been left behind. If you present it like that, it somehow feels like an explanation. It's satisfying, so to speak."

As that was how it really went, Yuuki nodded wordlessly. At the same time, it was incomprehensible, he thought.

Death was a universal phenomenon. If they were born, there was no human who wouldn't die. Even though a person's death was a given, to the people surrounding them, it wasn't generally felt as the natural taking its course. Just the opposite. They embraced the sensation that something that should not have happened occurred. That continued. Something that shouldn't have happened happened again, feeling almost like they were caught up in a disaster. Always, something which you had no consciousness of was thrusting you into a fabricated and unreasonable reality, the sensation of discomfort, dread and unease, a sense of mystery. Can this keep happening, a feeling says, the uneasiness of what to do if it carries on, and the original fear that goes 'I knew it' when it does. It wasn't a sensation that could easily be explained but if you turned your words about enough, that could at least express it.

Even knowing it was the work of chance, one couldn't think it was anything other than the work of something's choice. Something distinctly outside of one's self, called "death." Impossible to control or even to be influenced, the merciless divine providence. The vague and ambiguous unease towards it, you met with it as if being "drawn" and were liquidated. ---Mysteriously.

"Humans are strange beings," Yuuki murmured. As Hirosawa tilted his head dubiously, Yuuki smile. "Or maybe that death in regards to humans is the way to phrase it. "I have the feeling humans have a strange way of behaving when it comes to death."

That's true, said Hirosawa, showing a peaceful smile.

Even as evening fell the rain hadn't stopped. On the contrary, it grew gradually stronger, showing signs of being a downpour. In the thick curtain of clouds and

rain, despite being before five it was already dark. Takami stood and turned on the light.

Even trying to look out from the door window, even the row of houses just across the street was hazy. A water current ran over the surface of the road. As expected the human traffic died out, the residential police box isolated in the rain.

The sound of the rain reverberated as if shaking the earth. The sound somehow fanned his unease. The flickering florescent light too blinked as if to spur that on further still. Like signaling a bad omen, the phone rang.

Takami lifted the old fashioned style black receiver. The one calling was Yasumori Tokujirou.

"Ah---Takami-san. It's really coming down, isn't it."

"You said it. What's the matter?"

"Nothing really, I just saw the river though and the water level's pretty high. The water's a muddy color too. Seems a lot of dirt's being swept away. Even without that, with the long drought we've been having, the grass and the roots all dried up, and the slopes have been getting fragile. If the rain goes on like this, just to be prepared, I was thinking we should call the fire brigade together."

Takami nodded. "That might be good. I'll open the station for you."

The fire brigade's station was right next to the residential police box. Takami was given a spare key just for such occasions as this.

"I don't think the mountain stream's riverbanks are so fragile they'll break for nothing, myself. It's just, it might overflow downriver or at the drainage channel, and all."

"Yes. Then there's the mountainsides. It will be fine if we don't have a landslide, but."

"You said it. We'll have the Ward Headmen go around giving the announcements to be careful."

Tokujirou apologized two or three times before hanging up the phone. Takami took the station's spare key and put on warm clothes and a raincoat. He couldn't

see the point in bringing an umbrella. Mumbling that it was terrible, Takami undid the station lock. He turned the light on. Before long, the brigade members would start showing up as time permitted. Returning to the station while thinking he'd have to help his wife at the soup kitchen, he left the station. Just on the verge of returning, his feet suddenly stopped on a whim. The water was flowing past the shell of his rubber boots. He couldn't say Tokujirou's concerns were baseless fears. If things went poorly, the slopes really were liable to give.

Takami looked towards the western mountains. With the curtain of rain, of course the mountain couldn't be made out.

"....It could be bad, huh." Takami mumbled to himself. He thought of the Kanemasa house. To begin with it was a house on high grounds, and worse, last year the foundations had been tampered with. Luxurious garden trees were transported in. In other words, the roots and the ground were dug up, then leveled out. Tokujirou said they would go around giving notices but was there anybody who would go about to contact that household?

Takami hesitated somewhat.By all rights, if someone had moved in he would have had to do door to door canvasing. He had to ask the family structure and phone number and mark it down in the ledger but Takami had neglected to do such until today. There was the fact that the house's structure seemed to reject outsiders, making him nervous. But secondly there was also the fact that even when he did ask, there was no answer at the intercom. Then there was the fact that earlier that summer, wanting to confirm whether anyone had moved in or not, he'd snuck in, and had felt a little guilty. But, if that was the case for even Takami, then there might not have been anyone at all who had their phone number in order to call them and tell them. Even if that wasn't the case, in the event someone were worried about a landslide, was there anybody who'd remember Kanemasa? In this rain, was there anybody who would take the trouble to go say something to them?

"I'd best go on then, with it like this."

Takami drummed up his courage and started off by foot towards the west. While the tempestuous streaks of pouring rain battered his shoulders and back, he hurried over the fording roads. It was for the best that somebody contacted them. Even if two people did, there wouldn't be anything wrong with that.

After Takami set out, the office was left unmanned. The surroundings were blurred in ink-black. Amongst that, the station's doorway was open, light tinged yolk-yellow leaking out.

sinnesspiel

Ohkawa Gigorou -- (August 1st?) 77 years old / Yamairi

Cause of death unknown

Murasako Hidemasa -- (August 1st?) 75 years old / Yamairi
Cause of death unknown

Murasako Mieko -- August 5th

68 years old / Yamairi
Acute liver failure?

Gotouda Shuuji -- August 6th

39 years old / Kami-Sotoba
Acute heart failure
Cause of death unknown

Hirosawa Takatoshi -- August 11th

28 years old / Naka-Sotoba
Acute Heart Failure

Shimizu Megumi -- August 15th

15 years old / Shimo-Sotoba
Cause of death Unknown

Yasumori Giichi -- August 17th

74 years old / Monzen
Pneumonia

Ohtsuka Yasuyuki -- August 18th

35 years old / Shimo-Sotoba
Acute liver failure

Gotouda Fuki -- August 21st

69 years old / Kami-Sotoba
Acute renal failure?

Shimizu Ryuuji -- August 23rd

41 years old / Sotoba
Acute heart failure

Seishin peered at his notes.
"Aside from Giichi-san, cause unknown or acute failure, is what it comes down to isn't it?"
"That'd be one way to put it. Anyone's sudden death can be expressed in terms of unexpected organ failure. The one and only exception seems to be Giichi-san, it's just that..." Toshio started, the edges of his brows knitting together as he fixed his eyes on the memo. The word organ failure is used to denote a condition where the nature of what caused the fatal damage to the function of the organ can't be properly defined. It's rare for just one organ to shut down in one shot. It usually happens that one organ's functioning declines and it influences the other organs, advancing to multiple organ failures. It usually involves symptoms showing for the whole body. Even with only one cause of death, the odds are high that there'll be symptom across multiple organs. That was the case with Mieko baa-san."
Ah, Seishin nodded. Mieko had been dissected with problems discovered here and there. It was said to be liver failure but that was because of the striking necrosis of her liver.
"A compromised host is another possibility. A being whose immune system has been weakened gets prone to infection. Giichi-san's pnuemonia isn't impossible to see as a link in this, so we can't just split them up based on the cause of death. While there's still a question mark on all this, it's better to calculate them all as serial deaths, isn't it?"
Seishin nodded.
"Symptoms they all have in common are---sudden outbreak, organ failure, full body problems?"
"I didn't oversee its progression so I can't say anything but looking just at this, I think we can say that it leads to multiple organ failure. Whether it's the liver

breaking down or the heart breaking down doesn't matter, there's some kind of cause, and there's the impression that in the end it leads to multiple organ failure, right?"
Ishida tilted his head, and Toshio gave a breath.
"In other words, I'm saying this. I don't know if it's an infection, poisoning, or something else. At any rate, there's a culprit, and you can think of it having killed ten people. Mieko-san died of liver failure. But that can't be definitively said to be because our serial killer attacked the liver. The serial killer might've attacked another part.
In truth, looking at Mieko baa-san's autopsy report, of course there was the liver, but the lungs, heart, kidneys, all the vital organs showed signs of problems. The serial killer might've attacked the lungs first. The other organs functions declined, pulled along the problems with her lungs, and in the end the liver was the first to give out, is another way it could be interpreted."
"Ah, I see."
"Something attacked ten people. With it as the trigger, their whole body's functioning suffered, with multiple organs' decreased functioning, is the best way to think of it. The problem is what's inducing the multiple organ failure, that's what we have to figure out but---"
"Absolutely terrible, this is just," Ishida was at his wits end. "This is huge!"
"The death toll is ten, and there's the possibility that each of them had the same pattern. First, the thing to do is look for the common cause."
"Common cause?"
"That's right. The ten people should have something in common. They set foot in the same place, touched something, ate the same thing, ---there should be something."
Seishin looked at the written notes. The years were scattered, the first three cases were in the community of Yamairi but the places were scattered, it didn't look like there was any place that it was inclined towards. When he said as much, Toshio nodded.
"Seven men, three women, it'd be a weak inclination if any. There're the elderly but there's also a high school student. Territorially, you could say it's all over Sotoba. The first three were generally restricted to Yamairi in their daily habits, it might have seemed like ti was restricted to Yamairi but I can't imagine Megumi-

chan setting foot in Yamairi. Much less Giichi-san who's bedridden. It's more likely to think the other nine people came into Monzen but if something that was the cause was in Monzen, then it doesn't make sense that there's only one death in Monzen. There should be more deaths in Monzen."
Ishida groaned. "There's no choice but to go door to door and see if anything matches. I'll----"
"That'd be bad," Toshio stopped Ishida. "If Ishida-san goes out asking persistently, the family will think something's up. There should be a more discrete way to investigate."
"For the time being," Seishin said taking the notes from Toshio. "I'll try asking as much as I'm able. Either way, I will be going into most of the houses for memorial services after all. It isn't as if I have no connections to Shimizu Gardening or the Ohtsuka Sawmill after all, I can probably at least start a conversation to ask them. For this Hirosawa Takatoshi person, even, I may be able to find out something through connections with the parish families."
Toshio exhaled. "It's incredibly suspicious but that'd be the most quiet way to do it. Then, we'll leave this to Seishin."
Seishin nodded.
"For the time being, we'll suspect an epidemic as the worst case scenario. If we do that, there's no problem thinking that Fuki-san caught it from Shuuji-san. The problem is Shuuji-san, who'd be suspected to have caught it from Hidemasa-san more than anyone else. There's a possibility that the compass needle in this case is pointing to one of the first three in Yamairi."
Seishin nodded and took the notes.
"Megumi-chan fell on August 11th, and died on the 15th. I don't know what her condition was on the tenth but for the time being if we think of the outbreak as being on the eleventh, it was four days until she died."
"Fuki-san was saying that Shuuji-san's condition was off two or three days before."
"The day of the outbreak isn't clear but it looks the same as Megumi's case as expected. The Murasako's Mieko-san came in to the hospital on---" Toshio's eyes fell to the notebook. "July 30th, a Saturday, for Gigorou-san's medicine. At that time she was saying how Gigorou-san had caught a summer cold, and that Hidemasa-san seemed to have caught it, too. The police autopsy estimated their

day of death as around August 1st. I don't know when Hidemasa-san had the outbreak but if it was the day before we were told about his poor condition, thinking of it as on the twenty ninth, it was three days until he died."

Shimizu Megumi -- Outbreak - August 11 (?) Died - August 15th

Gotouda Shuuji -- Outbreak - August 3rd (?) Died - August 5th

Ohkawa Gigorou --Outbreak - July 28th (?) Died - August 1st (?)

Murasako Hidemasa -- Outbreak - July 29th (?) Died - August 1st (?)

"Either way, between the outbreak and death there are only a few days. If we assume for argument's sake a breadth of about five days, Fuki-san's corpse that was discovered on the 21st---when her death was probably the day before on the 20th, making the outbreak probably on the 15th or later."
Seishin nodded.

Gotouda Fuki -- Outbreak - August 15th (?) Died - August 20th

"I think Fuki-san was sure to have caught it from Shuuji-san. Shuuji-san's death was on the sixth, estimated outbreak on the third. Between Shuuji-san's outbreak and Fuki-san's outbreak is an interval of twelve days. If we count from when Shuuji-san died, it becomes nine days. The spread is from one to two weeks, which would make that the incubation period. Megumi-chan's outbreak was on the eleventh, which means Megumi-chan was infected somewhere between August 4th to July 19th. This overlaps right with when the three in Yamairi had their outbreak and died. If it was a direct infection, Megumi-chan would have had to have contact with the three in Yamairi at this time but---she wouldn't, would she? Not normally."
Seishin and Ishida nodded. The odds of a highschooler living in Shimo-Sotoba making contact with three old people who lived in Yamairi were low no matter how one thought about it.
"Because that indeed doesn't seem to be the case, if we could clarify that she had contact with them, we could say with certainty that it was a direct infection, but. Mieko baa-san's death was on August 4th. Since when she came to the hospital on the 30th she didn't say a word about anything feeling wrong with her, the outbreak must have been after that on the thirty first or August 1st, without much doubt."

Murasako Mieko -- Outbreak - July 31st (?) Died - August 5th

"With that, the infection was between July 17th and the 20th, so thinking that she contracted it from Hidemasa-san at this time is a little unreasonable. It's probably more appropriate to think that Gigorou-san and Hidemasa-san happened one right after the other."
"Something happened in the middle of July. And probably in Yamairi."
"Probably. If they didn't go out anywhere during that time, the source of the contagion is in Yamairi. The problem is Shuuji-san."
"Was it the people of Yamairi, or possibly Yamairi itself."
"That's what it comes to, doesn't it? It's not clear if the Yasumori's Giichi-san had the same disease orn ot but if we say it is the same thing, he was infected more or less at the same time as Megumi-chan. However Giichi-san was bedridden, he couldn't have gone out himself. Right now, there's nobody at the Maruyasu Sawmill who's in bad condition, so if somebody infected him, somebody paying a sick visit would be suspect. Did anyone pay a sick visit to Giichi-san's place at the end of July---moreover, someone connected to Yamairi."
"I'll try asking," Seishin jotted as much down on his notes. "---Is there anything else?"
"The Yasumori Contracting firm. Today, Nao-san from the contractors came for an examination. I did as many examinations as I could but it was clearly anemia. Other than that there was nothing wrong that could be said to be it. It's the same, like Megumi-chan."
Seishin's hand stopped as he looked to Toshio's face.
"It can't be---?"
"I can't make a proclemation of it but the likelihood is high. Today's the 24th, so if Nao-san was infected, it was between August 10th and August 17th. Just around when Giichi-san died."
The Yasumori Contractors were a branch family of the Maruyasu Sawmill. Giichi was the oldest sun of the Yasumori enterprises, Tokujirou's older brother. Even beyond work, their connections were deep, and the houses were close and intimate.
"According to what Nao-san herself said when I asked her, she didn't go anywhere in particular nor did anything special happen. She didn't go to Yamairi, and didn't meet with the three from Yamairi. She doesn't know Gotouda Shuuji-

san. She's only heard of his name, that's about it. But, when going over to the sawmill, it seems she met with Giichi-san countless times when seeing how he was doing. Of course, she also came to the all night vigil. If Nao-san does have what we're talking about, there's probably no mistake in thinking Giichi-san had it."
Ishida gave a deep sigh and shook his head. "Then, anyway, for that much we will depend on the Junior Monk's kindness... After that, concretely, what do we...?
Toshio gave a small groan.
"At any rate, we don't have enough information. First, we need to quickly get a grasp on what's happening. To say it concretely, our top priority is the particular cause of death. The disease's specific name, or otherwise its specific cause. What's the cause for so many deaths, what's this thing's nature, we need to make it clear whether it's a contagion or not. We'll need a clinical sample for that. Like it is now, everything over and jumping to announcing their deaths, we can't give a satisfactory cause of death."
Seishin murmured. "But, we cant to avoid a situation where patients flood the hospital spurred in by worry...."
"Right. That's the dilemma. The bottleneck here is that the initial symptoms are basic and easy to overlook. We don't have any choice but to have Ishida-san handle this by passing arond a warning notice about not leave summer colds or fatigue from the heat to a layperson's judgement."
Ishida nodded. "Anyways, I will make the leaflets ASAP. How do leaflets with the symptoms of summer colds or summer heat's symptoms and how to treat those conditions sound?"
"I'd be grateful if you could do it like that. And how to assess cases of summer colds or summer heat, and along with that how to treat those in-home, and that if the symptoms don't match, or if how treatment is having no effect, to go to the hospital."
"I'll do it. And urgently."
"Counting on it. And if there are any death certificates that come into the office from doctors other than me, I want to know about them right away."
"I will send copies of the death certificates. It would be better to avoid faxing them, wouldn't it?"
"That's right. That'd probably be better. I'm sorry for the trouble of the trip, but

please deliver them directly."
"Understood.
"From there, I'll count on Seishin for the investigations on the dead. I'll let you know the details of the investigation later. We can't talk about the circumstances, so it can't be helped that you'l have to ask about things in the indirect range. Since the victims themselves are already dead anyway, there's a limit to how much can be investigated, too. Rather, I don't want to make things worse."
Seishin nodded and looked to Toshio. "What about Mizobe and the Health Department?"
"That's the problem. What can we do about that."
"We can't very well keep it quiet, can we? At any rate, you have passed on the death tolls from the branch office up to the government office haven't you, Ishida-san?"
"Not the ones from August yet but, I will send them up immediately."
Toshio exhaled. "For now, there's no real obligation to report things up to the Health Department, but. It's probably necessary to report that there's been a lot of deaths."
Ishida nodded. "I'll report that there's a possibility of a massive disease outbreak."
"I've got my doubts they'll believe it or see it as a problem and take any action, but. Anyway, let them know that we've gotten this far. Afterwards we'll get together to see how far we've gotten."
"How does one week sound?"
"Sounds fine. And it'd probably be best to indirectly at least get Kanemasa involved. I'll take care of contacting him."
"And Tamo?" Seishin asked. Tamo Sadaichi was someone who could essentially be called the village headman. Essentially it was something for which the three pillars should be called together for. "We likely should need to inform Sadaichi-san too?"
Toshio was caught in thought. "Let's keep that quiet for now, sorry to say to Sadaichi-san. In the first place we've still got some doubts, and we don't have a single thing nailed down for sure yet. If Sadaichi-san asks, then we can't not report the true state of affairs to him but if he doesn't then it's probably better

to wait until we at least know if it's an epidemic or not. If he knows about it, there's no way he can't report it to the Ward Headman's Association, after all." That's true, said Ishida taking the notepad and closing it. "Well then, for the time being it will be between this group."

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5

Toshio joined Ishida in leaving the temple office. The grounds were awash in rain like literal waterfalls. At the best of times the outside lights were hazy with moisture, making the courtyard all the darker now.

Taking Ishida's car back to the hospital, Toshio held up his recently unused umbrella and jogged across the grounds. Trying to find a place for his feet to fall that wasn't a puddle of water proved difficult. When he stepped into the white Corolla, he was already soaked from the knees down.

Ishida slid into the driver's side and closed the door. With the sounds of the rain now sounding a bit far off, the inside of the car had the air of a locked room.

"...Ishida-san, I want to discuss something with you."

Yes, Ishida asked, starting the engine and turning to look at Toshio.

"This case; could I have you keep it quiet for a while?"

"Yes, but of course."

Toshio looked to the front pane of glass fogged by moisture out into the darkness and the rain of the grounds as he spoke.

"That's not what I mean. For a while, I want you to hold off on reporting to your superiors. Until I say it's okay, I don't want you to send anything out of Sotoba."

Ishida blinked. Cutting off Ishida before he could day 'but', Toshio urged him to start driving. For the short distance to the Ozaki clinic he said nothing, opening his mouth only once they were at their destination. In the parking lot at night, in the curtain of rain that left nothing to be seen, the inside of the car was a completely isolated world.

"...Ishida-san. To tell the truth, I think it's a plague. I dare say I'm sure of it. And no common one. I researched and researched, but no epidemic that matches the

symptoms was found."

"You can't mean a new strain?"

"A new strain or a variant strain, I can't tell. It's possible that it just simply looks that way, but. At any rate, what's certain is that this is a something momentous. Just looking at the victims we can see, they have a terrifyingly high mortality rate. Of course, there might be those with a sub-clinical infection. An outbreak that healed without anybody noticing is a possibility. But when that's not the case, it takes a sudden turn for the worse, and they die right away without any opening for treatment. And looking at just the death certificates, by the time it's at the level where anybody could notice the symptoms, it's already too far gone to do a thing about it."

Ishida's throat suddenly, audibly tightened.

"I don't know if it's sure to break out if someone's infected. But, I'm under the impression that once it breaks out, it's out of my hands. Starting in Yamairi, Sotoba's been contaminated. Like that, it'd been spreading."

"Y... yeah, yes."

"You report this to the administration. You do that, and what do you think will happen?"

"What, you say...."

"If at the end of the day it was a known epidemic, there'd be nothing to fear. I have an obligation to report, too. I can't just stay quiet. But if this is like I said before a new strain, what then? In that case, what can the administration do?"

Ishida moaned deep in his throat.

"...They can't do anything. As long as it isn't covered under the Communicative Diseases Prevention Law, or it isn't food poisoning with means determined by the food hygiene laws, there isn't any guideline for how to handle it."

"That's it exactly. In this case, it's not food poisoning. What's covered by the Communicative Diseases Prevention Law?"

"Uhm...."

"Eleven infectious diseases requiring official reporting, two kinds of specified

communicable diseases, twelve a physician is required to report within twenty four hours of diagnosis, the Parasite Prevention Law, the Tuberculous Control Law, one counts under the Leprosy Prevention Law, the Venereal Disease Prevention Law covers four, for a sum of thirty-two types covered. Furthermore of those infectious diseases that are regulated to be kept under surveillance, none overlap with those thirty-two. ---If it's one of those, there's no problem. Even if it's a variant strain. But, if that's not the case? Of course the administration has to do

something."

"Yes...."

Ishida was shivering. That was correct. If there was no legal method of handling it the only thing to do would be to isolate the patients. The doctors and administration couldn't very well ignore the person's wishes and strap them down!

"When it comes to giving them an honorable little push for assistance, we can't count on the Kanemasa's son. It's just like you said. It'd be good if the predecessor was still alive. Even if this gets out we can't count on the administration's help. And that's not all. If this is a new strain of disease, and if it is one that spreads by direct transmission, what do you think's gonna happen?"

"...I don't know."

"Look at what happened with Ebola and you get the idea, don't you? They shut it in. It gets out that there's an unknown epidemic spreading through Sotoba. After that the first thing to do to try to contain it is to isolate it. Sotoba's quarantined, patients are kept from leaking out. If there's no legal basis to do that on, then there's no stopping it from being done in some underhanded fashion. The administration and the Medical Association could collude and move to have Sotoba kept on the down low, handled behind the scenes. That'd be the only way it could go."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Certainly, with that you could protect against it spreading. It's especially valid when it comes to containing an epidemic with as high a fatality rate as this one. But, Sotoba can't be saved like that, Ishida-san. It's like waiting for a fire to burn

itself out without sending in a fire truck. If there's not a blade of grass left to burn, the fire might naturally die out but what's that mean for Sotoba?"

Ishida nodded.

"I by no means want to hush up the situation. If it is an infectious disease we're legally required to report, I have that obligation too, and of course the minute it's identified as one I'll report it. If I can convey that it's not spread by direct contact, so there'd be no meaning in closing off Sotoba, we'll pass it up to the administration. But, if the source of the contamination really is in Yamairi, if this's an epidemic that's unique to Sotoba, if it turns out to be directly transmitted, it's going to need to be handled with a certain delicacy."

"I understand what you're saying, Junior Doctor. I understand, but...."

"If it really does spread by direct contact, even I can think of some ways to handle it. There are ways to independently and cooperatively isolate it, ways to announce it indirectly through the Medical Association. I'm promising that it's going to be handled, so can't you keep it down for just a while for me?"

Ishida hesitated to respond. As if seeing through his hesitation, Toshio looked at Ishida. His voice was somehow penetratingly cold as he lowered his voice to a whisper.

"It'd be better if it spreads outside, Ishida-san. If it's something the administration can't help with anyway. If they personally aren't feeling the heat, they won't do a thing. Unless it's to protect themselves, not a damn thing."

"Junior Doctor."

"Mount Unzen, Okushiri Island, Matsumoto." Tosho murmured as if reciting a chant. "....If you believe the administration will cooperate to help the people at the scene of the tragedy, I'd like to ask your basis for that belief."

Ishida opened his mouth, then, hesitatingly, closed it. Taking in Ishida's silence, Toshio opened the passenger side door. The mists and deafening sound of the rain suddenly flowed in.

"Sorry 'bout this, Ishida-san. I'm counting on you."

"....Yes, sir."

Having gotten out of the car, Toshio bent his body down to speak to Ishida. "And also, could you keep this a secret from Seishin? He's an idealist you know, he can't handle balancing good and evil."

I understand was all Ishida replied.

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But right now without a name to put to the disease, the government won't move. What those guys call an epidemic isn't something spreading around to the people; for them it's a word for an existing contagious disease written into the protocol or manuals.

Epidemics and Japanese Health Laws

Epidemic, densenbyou, literally translates to contagious disease. However not all contagious diseases are legally classified as densenbyou (epidemics) in Japanese. Lay people may use the word translated as "epidemic" to refer to a massively destructive and spreading malady. Medical professionals however would only refer to an "epidemic" as those outlined by the government in the Epidemic Disease Prevention Act, as the word implies specific legal duties on their part. The Epidemic Disease Prevention Act was repealed in 1999 and replaced by the reformed Infectious Disease Control Law. A doctor in the 1990s could accurately declare a contagious disease was not an epidemic (legally), which linguistically would be saying that it was not a contagious disease.

Epidemic Disease Prevention Act

Legal Epidemic Diseases: (cholera, dysentery, typhoid fever, paratyphoid A, smallpox, typhus, scarlet fever, diphtheria, epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis, bubonic plague, Japanese encephalitis). These were reported to the health and town officials, and the patient is to be quarantined for treatment at a cost paid by the government.

Specified epidemic diseases: (polio, Lassa fever). These were diseases designated for treatment identical to the above 11 in the original law.

Required reporting diseases: (influenza, rabies, anthrax, epidemic diarrhea, pertussis (whooping cough), lock jaw, malaria, scub/Bush typhus, filaria, yellow fever, recurrent fever). These were diseases that physicians were required to report within 24 hours to health officials, and treatment could take place either at home or in an ordinary hospital ward.

The Venereal Disease Prevention Law: (syphilis, gonorrhea, chancroid, lymphogranuloma urethritis). These are to be reported to health officials who passed the numbers to national officials.

The Tuberculosis Control Law: A physician must report diagnosis of tuberculosis within two days and their treatment bill will be paid by the government.

Leprosy Prevention Law: A doctor who diagnoses leprosy must report it within 7 days and the potentially effected patients will be put in a sanatorium at the government's cost. This law was also repealed in 1996, designating leprosy as a Legal Epidemic Disease.

The Parasitic Disease Prevention Law was not a part of the Epidemic Disease Prevention Act but is a law stating that the government may spend funds investigating by means of physical examinations or feces exams for signs of parasitic diseases (Roundworm, hookworm, liver flukes, blood flukes (Schistosoma japonicum)) and also in providing treatment for them. This law was repealed in November of 1994.
Without counting parasites as a disease (The Parasitic Disease Prevention Law is actually separate from the Epidemic Disease Prevention Law) that leaves 32 diseases that the government required and took action (read: spent money) on. As the government also does spend money on parasite control Ozaki also

mentions that, highlighting the limited expectations had for government intervention on any health matter.

Chapter 1 - 5

Ozaki cites three large incidents that warranted the administration's actions, contrasting to Sotoba where he does not believe they will have the same impetus to help the isolated victims.

Mount Unzen

- Volcanos located in Nagasaki which were active from 1990-1995. There was a major eruption in 1991, though due to attention and evacuation orders, the direct on-site casualties were fewer than 50, and primarily made up of scientists and film crews aware of the danger. The emperor and family had come to the site to eat cheap survivor meals such as instantcurry and there was much support provided for victims through various agencies coordinating with the government and independently.

Okushiri Island

- An island in Hokkaido ravaged by an earthquake in 1993, which triggered a tsunami, landslides, and other structural damage. Considerable government funds were spent on rebuilding including building houses on higher grounds, wave defense walls, a tsunami shelter, and memorials to the 200 or so fatal victims.

Matsumoto

- Several terrorist attacks with sarin gas in Matsumoto in June of 1994 are referred to as the Matsumoto Incident. The religious cult Aum Shinrikyou was eventually found guilty of the attacks. Motives including testing it for a future attack that took place in Tokyo later in 1995 and trying to kill the judges overseeing court charges of fraud against the cult to delay the verdict. In response to the attacks the government formed risk and medical management

procedures for chemical terrorism and instituted analytical instruments in hospitals and police task forces specifically for incidents of biochemical warfare.

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1

Nao's results that were requested from the Tajima National Health Institute ASAP were delivered to Toshio's hand the following day just before noon. The rain from the night before had lifted. Again, the sunlight poured in, downright annoyingly.

Bringing in the results and the coffee, Ritsuko looked over the waiting room that had become piled with books in such a short time and sighed. Answering Ritsuko's question as to whether the room could be cleaned with a retort to do as she pleased, Toshio looked over the results. He laid them side by side with the simple examination results performed at the hospital yesterday.

It was the same as Megumi's case. All types of blood cells were decreased, as were her hemoglobin and hematocrit levels. Clear signs of anemia. More specifically normocytic normochromic anemia. However, serum bilirubin and LDH levels were normal. With all other values normal, there appeared to be no irregular functioning of the liver or kidney. The results of the Coombs tests were negative. While it was negative, there was no abnormal hemolysis. The same as Megumi. It didn't look like there was anything that could be it besides anemia.

(Is it really simple anemia, or is it...)

Last night, he put the peripheral blood smears and the bone marrow sample under a microscope. The blood smear showed an increased reticulocyte count, as well as nucleated red blood cells. Hyperplasia was occurring in the bone marrow but while Toshio was no hematology specialist he found nothing amiss in its form. There was nothing that could be thought of as abnormal other than the blood production levels. Rather, it'd be better to think of it as a release of young red blood cells due to an expenditure of a large quantity of red blood cells.

(If that's the case)

Was it lost to internal bleeding, or was it quickly destroyed by hemolysis?

(It isn't internal bleeding...)

Neither through palpations nor x-rays were there particular signs of internal bleeding. It didn't look like there was really any swelling of any internal organs either.

(But, I can't think of it as hemolysis either.)

The Coombs tests came back negative. It wasn't autoimmune hemolysis, and looking at the images of the blood smear, it wasn't hemolysis stemming from irregular cell shapes either. With serum bilirubin and LDH levels normal, it really couldn't be thought of as hemolysis.

No matter how many times he thought about it, the more he thought on it , the more each possibility was thoroughly denied. What shouldn't have been happening was happening. Something was strange.

Deep in thought as Toshio was, for a while he didn't realize that Ritsuko who was sorting the mountains of books had asked him something.

"---Doctor, are you listening?"

"Nn? Aa?"

Ritsuko's expression faintly clouded. "Is she that bad, Nao-san?"

"Nah. That's not what it is. I just get the feeling the results have a kinda mismatch with common sense. ---So what about what, now?"

Ritsuko forced a smile. "It wasn't important. I just said it seems that the mountains are crumbling in here and there, aren't they?"

"Heeh?"

"Before, Sagawa-san from Naka-Sotoba had come, for treatment. At the Sagawa Ojii-chan's place, which is built facing the western mountain cliff, that cliff gave out and mud came pouring into the house, he said. He was lamenting how hard it was to clean up."

"Damn---it'd have been just as well if the mud swallowed the whole house and was done with it."

"Ojii-chan was saying the same himself. The main room was a field of mud but it should have just finished the job, he said. After all, if the whole thing collapses in, it might turn into a crisis."

"You said it."

"The northern mountains might be giving too. I heard noises last night you know. As if exposes were being used, 'boom', like."

"....The northern mountain?"

Yes, Ritsuko nodded. Ritsuko's house was in Kami-Sotoba. Near the base of the northern mountain.

"I think it was the northern mountain. Going by the noises, I wonder if it wasn't a major landslide? But, as the northern mountain is the temple's territory, there wouldn't be anybody there, would there."

That's true, Toshio murmured. Would it be good to let Seishin know? As he thought that, Ritsuko piled up the last book on top of the low table. "I've inserted blank memo sheets into the pages they were open to so you can find where you were again, so don't worry."

Thanks, Toshio said with a forced smile, then calling out to Ritsuko as she made to step out. "Sorry again, Ricchan. Could you call the construction firm and ask about Nao-san's condition for me? It's fine if it's the family rather than her. Anyway, ask how she is, let them know that if she needs a re-examination, even this evening is fine, so be sure to come."

Ritsuko's brows furrowed. "Is it that serious....?"

"It's not for sure it's that bad, I told you that right? The results seem to defy reason in a weird way. I thought we should try re-analyzing her one more time."

Is that so, Ritsuko said, sounding unsatisfied with the explanation. He called out once again to stop Ritsuko who was leaving, holding the tray.

"That's right, Ricchan. One more thing. After the break, before the front desk opens could you call everyone together?"

"Yes?"

"I was thinking we'd add some appointments into the schedule. Not for all the patients, by any means. Just the patients I specify are fine."

"Uhm.... starting tomorrow, is it?"

Toshio nodded. He'd give more precise details when everyone was gathered, so he dismissed, but Ritsuko's expression was somewhat unsettled.

She must be suspicious, Toshio thought. But that's fine, he said to himself. The hospital staff was on the front lines. Sooner or later, they'd notice the unusual circumstances, and furthermore, since they couldn't help but be on the front lines facing the threat, he couldn't leave it hushed up forever.

"What do you think this is about?" Ritsuko asked Yasuyo. Yasuyo looked to Kiyomi, exchanging glances, then gravely nodding.

".....I knew it. I thought something was strange."

That's right, Kiyomi said with a sigh. "I got the feeling he's being clearly protective over the young wife of the Yasumoris, too."

What do you mean? Satoko and Yuki both tilted their heads. Yasuyo resolutely folded her arms.

"What I mean is, aren't there too many dead around? Yuki-chan, you two might not have noticed but, since this August, it's been unusual."

"Has it?"

"It wouldn't be impossible to think that. After all, the patients never came in, all that comes in are notices of their death. And on top of that, early in the mornings. Before we've even come in to work."

Kiyomi nodded. "In Kami-Sotoba, somebody under forty died, didn't they? And then the three in Yamairi."

Aa, Yuki and Satoko nodded.

"And after that, in Shimo-Sotoba, a high school student. From there, Giichi-san, and the mother of the first death."

Eh, Yuki's eyes were wide. "Seven people? Since August began?"

"That's just it. I was sure it was something suspicious. Death does tend to

come in mysterious patterns but, no matter how you think about it, these are too many in a row."

"Do you think something's happening?"

Listening to the two of them, Ritsuko nodded as if thoroughly understanding what the older nurses were saying.

"I wonder if it isn't an epidemic. At least, the Junior Doctor may be suspecting it. Patients may be coming in with that from here on, and those patients he would want to give preferential examinations."

"Then, Nao-san is also...."

"The way he's so vigilant on her, he may suspect it."

Yuki and Satoko exchanged worried looks.

"Uhm... I wonder if we'll be all right?"

"Who knows? But, if it's dangerous, the Junior Doctor would tell us wouldn't he? That he isn't saying anything may mean he has no positive proof yet, but for the time being the hospital's all right, isn't it? That person is, even if only in matters like this, a precise and proper doctor."

Kiyomi breathed another sigh. "Either way, it'd be better to use disinfectant and be sure to wear gloves at all times. We have to at least be aware of that much."

Yasuyo nodded. "There's a disease we don't know anything about going around after all. ....It'll be good if it's not too unusual of one, but."

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2

Seishin stopped his car at the shoulder of the road and looked at the note Toshio made. Therein were the listed elements that needed to be investigated.

The deceased's sex, age, occupation. Education history, standard of living. Household circumstances, particularly if they used well water. Family structure, maritual status, their parents ages, birth order, family medical history. The individual's medical history, if they drank, if they smoked, eating habits, customs. Their daily sphere of activity, particularly their actions throughout July. The note was made out like a form, with what was filled out filled out from their death certificates and the family registers but there were many blanks.

If going in the order of the outbreak, the first to contract it were the three in Yamairi. If one believed Mieko's talk of catching it from Gigorou, then Ohkawa Gigorou would be thought of as the first. The estimation of when he would have contracted it was right around the middle of July. If at that time, Gigorou or the others had gone out some place, that place could be thought of as being infected. ----That this could be told quickly by asking the bereaved families was something that Seishin was, at first, optimistic about. So he was, but the conversations weren't so simple.

Murasako Hidemasa had lost his wife, his sister, and his nephew, a total of three people. Indeed there weren't any close relatives remaining in the village. But fortunately, as the three had their funeral services performed by the temple, the contact addresses of the Murasako household were left with them. As they were living in Yamairi, he tried to contact any relatives living in the communities below, or any old people who had been close to them, but the results were futile. Nobody knew what the Murasako couple had been doing lately.

The Murasako family children hadn't by any means cut off ties with their parents but in the end their parents were a part of themselves that they had left behind in Sotoba. They hadn't forgotten them, they weren't estranged, and they

certainly hadn't lost their love for them, but they had their own lives. Long ago, they would have returned for Obon and rekindled their connections but with small children there were studies and lessons, reasons not to want to go far from home, and when children were at a more independent age, they then became the ones at home waiting to welcome those children to their own homecoming. As a result, their parents deserted in the country were looked back upon less and less.

"If they had even been in bad health, though," said Hidemasa's daughter. "I was worried myself, I did peek in on how they were doing, don't you know. Overall the two were healthy, after all. I thought myself I didn't need to worry and, how to put it---I just forgot. I just didn't worry about it anymore."

She harbored a secret regret of not contacting that but in this case, that it wouldn't have helped at all was true.

At any rate, as far as attempting to make contact in regards to the Murasakos, Seishin was---at least in regards to kith and kin---left with no choice but to accept that it would be near impossible to gather information. Never mind being able to ask the questions that would clarify the circumstances, there was a limit to how much he could ask even with a made-up pretense to dress it up under.

That left Ohkawa Gigorou, but... Seishin thought as he drove towards the village road. At least Ohkawa Gigorou had a nephew left in the village. The Ohkawa Liquor Shop's Ohkawa Tomio was that nephew. Under the guise of buying something on an errand, Seishin visited the Ohkawa Liquor Shop.

In the course of conversation, touching upon Gigorou's death, you must dearly miss him, Seishin said trying to direct the talk with Ohkawa.

"Naw, naw," said Ohkawa, his face a mingling of a smile and a grimace as he waved his hand. "He was already at that age, that old man was."

"None the less, were you not surprised?"

"If you're asking about surprises, that was sure a surprise. My old man's older brother suddenly died, and I was told by the police, after all. On top of that, I I try to go up to have a look and he's so rotted he's falling apart, and he's been strewn all over. Well, to say it's not something you get to experience often's sure enough."

That is true, Seishin nodded. "When was the final time that you had been able to meet with Gigorou-san?"

When was that, Ohkawa said tilting his head as he wrapped the bottle of sake. "It's not like we saw each other that much you know? I'm just gonna put it out there, he wasn't exactly a jolly old man, if there was nothing I needed I didn't feel like seeing him. The old man didn't by no means talk to us much either, when you think, huh he's calling us, it was to say I'm going out so give me your car or pick with up for me, or to say to do this or that for him," Ohkawa said, mouth forming into a pointed frown. "I'm his nephew, I'd think it'd be normal to ask how to make it convenient for me at least. If he stopped into the store unexpectedly once in a while, even if he got something, he didn't pay the bill on it. He didn't think of nothin' but himself. Then on my end, I just couldn't take him talkin' down to me even if he is my uncle. I'm not still some snot nosed brat after all. When I said that, he shouted who do you think I am, I don't have to sit and listen to this, you think I'm a old fart who won't just die already, and went home yelling."

Ohkawa spoke, his huge body rocking with laughter. Seishin frowned at the loud voice as he asked: "Then, you had not met with him just before the incident?"

"Didn't see him. Even before that---'at was early spring wasn't it? Suddenly he comes on in and takes a bottle off the shelf 'n tries to go, I yelled after him to at least bring the damn money to pay for it. I say that and, don't talk about such petty things between relatives, the old fucker says! Relative, relative, he says! I don't ever remember the old man ever helping me out once, don't remember him ever being no use either, is that what you call a relative, I said, took the bottle up out of his hands and pushed him out the front of the shop. I do that, he starts yelling out in front of the shop 'What about you!' I got too pissed off and threw water out at him. Did that, said don't come here again, I'm cutting off our ties, or somethin', I said."

"....Is that so."

"After that, he was incorrigible. Give me your car, go to the JA, he called to say, I slammed the phone down on him and lately the calls stopped coming too. Then suddenly the police call, saying he's kicked the bucket. After all that I'd say I got

no obligation to put up for his funeral but I'm the only one of his relatives left. Everyone's either gone and passed or left the village. Like you'd think, not even having a funeral's just too sad, so at the very end I ended up looking after him. I'm a soft hearted guy at the end of the day."

Ohkawa's body quaked with laughter. His wife Kazuko wore a supplicating smile. Seishin, with mixed feelings, paid and let the shop. At the side of the shop, Ohkawa's son Atsushi was breaking down a cardboard box as if it were an enemy. Giving a light bow to him, he suddenly and rudely faced away. In knee length sweats, his bare leg was wrapped in bandages. Were you injured, he had tried to ask, but he only replied, as if refusing him, that he was bit by a dog. It didn't seem Atsushi was in the mood to speak with Seishin. Unable to find a way to guide the conversation from there, Seishin left the Ohkawa Liquor Shop.

A sigh leaked out. With Ohkawa like that, they couldn't know what Gigorou had been up to. Even outside of the village, Gigorou basically didn't have any relatives he spoke with. He tried to at least ask who Gigorou was close with to Ohkawa, but he responded that "There wasn't no one 'sides the old Murasako pops" bluntly.

Yamairi was isolated, Seishin thought looking at the notes. Not only was it geographically isolated from the six communities below, it was isolated from regional bonds and blood bonds. Indeed, if that weren't the case, they weren't likely to be left behind that deep in the mountains. The three old people who had given up and been given up by so much, huddled together to get by. The three of them died in one fell swoop, everything down to footprints of their life floated away into thin air---.

Is this what it means to return to nothingness, Seishin thought. Everything a person amasses and erected, all of it was reduced to its meaningless origins.

---That is why death is so terrifying.

"That's it exactly...."

sinnesspiel

3

Yasumori Nao was ultimately, on the morning of the 26th, brought into the hospital all but carried in her husbands Mikiyasu's arms. Toshio couldn't help but be astonished with terror. Nao seemed half dazed, looking as if she wouldn't even have been able to walk sufficiently without support.

"Nao-san, how are you feeling?" he asked, but Nao did not answer. Taking great pains she moved her mouth but no reply came forth. First he gave direction to lie her out on the examining table. As Nao was assisted onto the table by the nurses, Mikiyasu who was attending to her looked incredibly worried as he watched over her.

"Toshio-san, what's the matter with Nao?"

"It's because I don't know that I'm doing a re-examination. The day before yesterday when she came, I told her if she was feeling even a little worse the next day to come in but she didn't come yesterday."

Mikiyasu shook his head. "She didn't say anything about that. When Mom asked the results, she said she was told it was probably anemia."

"Yesterday, how was Nao-san?"

"She slept throughout the day I think. I was at work, so I wasn't with her all day, but. It seemed she had a fever, and she was incredibly tired."

Toshio nodded. Nao's complexion was as poor as ever. The neckline of her sleeveless one piece and her arms looked almost pale blue. On those arms granulated purple spots could be seen. What looked like insect bites were here and there on the nape of her neck and arms, though they may have also been scratches. But, those insect bites looked to be forming pus.

Her breath was shallow, seeming out of breath even lying on the examining table. Checking her pulse, it was incredibly fast. She seemed to have a fever but

her limbs were cold, breaking out into a thin, cold sweat.

"Yasuyo-san," Toshio wrote out directions on a memo and called to Yasuyo. "A blood test. She has tachycardia, so just in case take an EKG for me too. Afterwards, tell Shimoyama-san to prepare for a US and a CT."

"Ah--yes sir."

Toshio took Mikiyasu, fretting with a look of suspense, into the waiting room.

"Toshio-san, uhm... What's wrong with Nao?"

"Well, have a seat," Toshio motioned to the sofa.

"Does she have some bad disease?"

"Nah. At least right now, we don't have any proof that she has a particularly serious disease."

A reliant look rose up on Mikiyasu's thin face. Living in Monzen like him, with their houses nearby and their age close, separated by four years, he was in the category of childhood friend. Toshio, brimming with a competitive spirit, was the boss of the group of kids, so when they were young he was what you could have called one of his henchmen. This is how it had been they were kids. If there was something troubling, he'd look at Toshio as if relying on him.

"But...."

"At the current stage I can't say anything," Toshio said, motioning again for Mikiyasu to sit on the sofa. "How long has Nao-san been unwell?"

"Uhm.... since two or three days ago, I'd say."

"The day before yesterday? Before that?"

"The day before that she was tired. Mom asked plenty of times if she was all right. She said go, go to the hospital."

"And the day before that?"

"How was she.... I don't remember. I don't think it seemed like she felt especially bad or anything then."

"What about you?" Toshio asked, making Mikiyasu blink.

"Me?"

"You, Tokujiro-san, or Atsuko-san, anyone. Or any of the younger guys at the contracting firm. Is there anybody who seemed to be sick the same way? If there were, we might think she caught a summer cold or something from them, but."

Mikiyasu tilted his head and thought, then after some time, answered that he didn't think so.

I see, Toshio sighed. "The day before yesterday when she came in, I did a few different tests but the results said that she had anemia, and that was all that came from it. Since we're still sorting through it, I want to say she has nothing but anemia. ---But even anemia alone has various types."

Mikiyasu's expression changed.

"That's.... I don't know about it in-depth but, there's pernicious anemia or, like, really bad anemia, isn't there?"

"At least just based on the test results, I don't think it's pernicious anemia or aplastic anema. It's probably not a problem at the blood formation level. I suspect it's a type of anemia from hemolysis but that's not something I can say for certain."

"Is that especially bad?"

"Oi, oi," Toshio forced himself to show a smile. "It's not like that. To tell the truth, I don't really know. It looks like anemia from hemolysis but I get the feeling it's different from that. It'll be all right to keep an eye on her for a while but, think of the season. She has all the duties of being the young wife of a contractor. There's all the anxieties, having to look after of all the young guys coming and going. She has a child on hand to tend to too, and since she's had a sudden drop in energy, let's take care with this, is all I'm saying."

"That's all..." Mikiyasu breathed. "Don't scare me like that, man. Going through the trouble of having a nurse call me, telling me to bring her in, suddenly talking to me about grave sounding test results, I was sure it was...."

"Well, still, until we can put a name to her condition it'd be better not to drop our guard. It's true that she seems really sick and all. Just in case we'll do another blood test and run a CT, and if that doesn't clear anything up, we'll send her to the National Hospital. If I have to I'll write a referral to the University hospital, even."

"Ah..... Mm. Yes."

Toshio was, he dared say, unable to make any difference in Megumi's case. Mikiyasu was relieved but Toshio who had comforted him was not. Nao was getting exceptionally worse. He was throwing vigorous efforts into it, but he was indeed uneasy.

sinnesspiel

4

Seishin wandered past the side of Chigusa towards the house peering in the entryway. Yano Tae who was watching TV in the living room soon noticed Seishin and called out 'Dear me!'

"Has something happened?"

"I had gone to the town of Mizobe, you see. I had thought to take a short rest at the shop, however, I then thought about how Tae-san may be doing."

"Please do come in," said Tae, then seeming to realize something. "Ah, it would be better to go into the shop. The Junior Monk would prefer coffee to cheap tea, would you not? There is also air conditioning there."

Standing before Seishin and putting on her sandals, Tae who motioned towards the shop somehow seemed thinner.

"Should it happen that you have lost weight?"

Tae looked back as they crossed the sun bathed garden. "It must be summer weight loss. Lately, meals just aren't very appetizing."

"It is not because you are depressed about what had happened with Fuki-san is it?"

Tae blinked as if something had struck her heart and gave a dejected sigh.

"...That isn't what it is, but. After all, I am at an age where it wouldn't be unusual for death to come pay me a visit, either. I am the same age as Fuki-chan, yes? We were classmates in school, you know."

"Is that so?"

"These kind of things are foreordained, yes? That's how I had thought, but. But, the day Fuki-chan died, I met with her, you know. She was sick, and I thought so many times that we should have the Junior Doctor come but Fuki-

chan said she was fine, so. But, if I had called the Junior Doctor at that time or if I had called an ambulance, wouldn't that person have been able to live at least a little longer, I think, yes...?"

"If you think that way..."

Tae shook her head. "No matter what, I can't put it out of my mind. Why didn't I call, I think. Why didn't I do what I could, even if it wouldn't have done any good, don't you think I would wonder? It isn't something I can take back and fix now but, once it came to mind, at that time I, if only I'd done this, that's all I can think about."

Saying so while sounding lonely, Tae opened the door to the shop. There were no signs of customers in the shop. Noticing Seishin and Tae approaching, Kanami bowed her head from behind the counter.

"Welcome. ---I thought I'd seen the Junior Monk's car."

"He had come to see how I was going," Tae said, earning a smile from Kanami.

"Thank you very kindly. ...Mother is really losing heart."

"Oi, oi, I'm getting used to it."

"That's how she is. Even if she is your friend, I don't want you to be pulled along with Fuki-san. Even if you don't rush, Fuki-san will wait for you, I'm sure of it."

Yes, yes, laughed Tae; Seishin saw she and Kanami in a very charming light.

"Tae-san is in a good place now, able to be with Kanami-san like this."

"That's so true," she said, looking delighted. "I'm happy that she came back but I worry since she came back because she divorced."

"If you can be that smart mouthed, there's nothing to worry about, is there," Kanami laughed, putting an iced coffee on the counter and urging it towards him.

"....In Yamairi, the Murasako-sans and Ohkawa-san were very lonely cases. They weren't quite what one would call estranged from their children, but."

Tae nodded sympathetically. "All of the children of the folks up there left the

village, didn't they."

"As it was all so sudden, I suppose it's uncertain whether something happened or not. Therefore, I had thought to inquire to the bereaved families as to how the state of things when they were alive, however, nobody is well informed, thus..."

"Well, dear me."

"Fuki-san was the same with only a few minor differences. All alone, as the one that had stayed with her, Shuuji-san, had died. Of course, Fuki-san did have friends, so it was much better, but." Kanami's brows furrowed. "Somehow, it's like the deaths keep coming this year. They say that a lot at the shop you know, that it's a terrible arrangement of fate. Anyway, about Fuki-san's case. Her older brother and son went, then ultimately she herself went. Do you suppose some terrible disease is spreading, is what some are thinking too, you know."

Seishin secretly held his breath. Kanami was watching him intently , but, it seemed that she herself didn't believe those words. A bittersweet smile rose to her face.

"You can't take even a summer cold lightly, huh? Gigorou-san was off, they thought, you know."

"---Ohkawa's?"

"Yes. Now when was that, I wonder? I caught sight of Gigorou-san getting off the bus. He looked sickly, and was wavering awkwardly, you know. I called out to him, but he didn't seem to notice. Then that news of what happened spread. I thought, I knew something was strange back then."

"When might that have been?"

"Wasn't that at the end of July, I suppose?" Kanami looked into the air as if searching her memory. "---Yes, at the end of July. After that, I'd heard that Gigorou-san and Hidemasa-san seemed sick, you know. It seems like it was Mieko-baa-chan who said that when she came down to do some shopping. Getting sick deep in the mountains like that, it'd be scary if it turned serious, I thought, then that's exactly how it went. It's unsettling."

"Can you remember approximately which day?"

Kanami tilted her head. "What day was it, I wonder? I heard that the two seemed sick, you know. That was when I thought, come to think of it... Just a few days before that, I'd seen Gigorou-san, huh, I thought...."

"It was the very next day that Gigorou-san left," Tae added. "First thing in the morning, he got on the bus saying he was going out somewhere. That next day he came back, so he must have stayed out somewhere overnight, and I remember wondering where he could have gone to."

"You'd said as much," Kanami nodded with a smile. "Mom gets up early. She happened to see Gigorou-san at the bus stop. She said he was at the bus stop headed for Mizobe. Then the next day he came back, she said, on--which day was that, now, I wonder? I heard that he seemed sick. They were talking about that in the shop...." Suddenly, Kanami's brows furrowed. "That's right, when he heard this, Shuuji-san suddenly said he would go to pay a get-well visit."

Seishin felt something had him by the heartstrings. "Shuuji-san did?"

"Yeah. Just that night, he came to drink. He'd already drank quite a bit, we told him to give it a rest, but 'I'm fine', he said. He called his house from here to say he was going to be late, since he was paying a get well visit. It was already pretty late, if you go to pay a visit at this hour, you'll just be troubling the patient, won't you, I had thought, but." Kanami said and gave a single nod. "Yes---That's right. Then it was six days later, that we had heard Shuuji-san had died. Shuuji-san hadn't come to the shop since then. It was rare for that person not to come for more than three days straight, so when we were wondering if something happened, it turned out he'd died."

Seishin stared at the grains of the wooden counter. The day Shuuji died was on August 6th. If it was six days before, then that would mean the 31st. On the 31st Shuuji went to Yamairi. But, the 31st---or around the early morning of the 1st was the estimated time of death. If they could believe police opinion, when Shuuji went to Yamairi, there was the possibility that Gigorou had already died. It was likely that Hidemasa and Mieko were also having their outbreak---.

Seishin felt unease. Shuuji ultimately might not have met with Hidemasa and Mieko. If he went into the house, he should have noticed that his uncle was in an extraordinarily poor state. If so then naturally he would have called somebody,

right? On top of not contacting anybody, Shuuji must have come back without meeting with Hidemasa but, ---but, Mieko also didn't contact anybody. Her husband was dead beside her and yet she herself died without contacting anybody.

(What is this, this similarity....)

Seishin was caught in his thoughts when Kanami raised her voice to say "That's right. I remember. The day before Gigorou-san went out, that was the day Motoko's child had the accident."

Seishin lifted his face.

"Right, the Junior Monk was at the hospital, weren't you? Shigeki-kun's mother."

"Aa....."

Seishin recalled Motoko's neurotic, erratic state.

"She was in my same class. She helps with the evening preparations. Motoko's child was hit by a car on July 27th, wasn't it? The next day on the 28th was when Gigorou-san went out, and he came back on the 29th. I heard that he was sick, and Shuuji-san went to pay a sick visit, that was six days before he died."

July 31st, Seishin nodded. "Had you seen Gigorou-san before that?"

"The time before that was---when was it, I wonder, when I saw him when he came back, I had thought it had been a while, so I don't think I'd seen him for some time."

"I wonder if Gigorou-san often went out traveling or any such like this?"

To that, Tae shook her head. "Not Gigorou-san. That person rarely left the village. After all, he didn't have any way to get around aside from his scooter. Hidemasa-san had a car but the only one who could drive a car was Hidemasa-san, so I'm sure it was a hassle for him to leave the village, wasn't it?"

"And Hidemasa-san?"

"That person, too, has a heavy bottom, you see. As far as traveling, I think it was pretty rare for him, you know. When was it? Once I met with Mieko-san at Fuki-san's place, and Mieko-san was saying how she'd like to go to a hot springs

once in a while. She was saying 'how many years has it been since we last went on a trip', or something like that."

"I wonder if he had felt like taking a trip this July, or...?"

"He didn't, I don't think. There's the rice fields and the vegetable fields, after all. Those people were living on a pension, they had to cultivate the fields to eat, you know. Maybe if it were a season when farmers could slack, but this wouldn't be the season for them to travel, don't you suppose? And this year especially, see, there hasn't been any rain. They must have had to use the pump and water the fields, people couldn't very well leave their fields at a time like this."

That's true, Seishin thought. This year there was a heatwave and a water shortage. The day before yesterday, there had been rain enough but there was ultimately little effect on the river's water levels. It wasn't too serious a problem for the village but, downstream there wasn't enough water, and even in Sotoba they had to pump water from the rivers and lakes. The village farmers had to draw water from the swamp and wells to spread over the fields. Certainly with things being what they were, they couldn't have gone out traveling anywhere.

Then, thought Seishin. The three were contaminated in Yamairi. Or else----?

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5

Toshio's worries bore out. The next day, in the middle of morning examination hours the phone call from Yasumori Mikiyasu came. Nao wasn't breathing, he said while crying. Told to come quickly, when he'd hurried to the contracting firm, Nao was gone. Her pupils were already dilated, and in her mouth the froth of a lung hemorrhage was visible. Pulminary edema caused by heart failure made choking the cause of death. August 17th, at 11:20.

The one Seishin received word of death from was Tamo Sadaichi. It was late afternoon, Seishin alone in the temple office with his manuscript spread before him, toying with superficial thoughts.

"The contractor's Nao-san has died!" Seishin held in his 'I knew it' at the sound of Sadaichi's voice at the other end of the receiver. Misunderstanding that silence, Sadaichi continued. "Mikiyasu-kun's wife. She was 26, or right around there. It's very sudden. It seems there was a problem with her lungs but, with things what they are, I will be taking charge of the assistants."

"Ah, ... yes."

The contrators' Yasumori Tokujirou was Monzen's Mourning Crew mediator. During these cases where the mediator's family had a misfortune, the head of the assistants acted as the agent. The head of the assistants wasn't a specifically assigned position but each community had their own rankings of a sort, and who the head of the assistants were was determined with an unspoken sense of agreement.

"The heat is still severe but, as sorry as I am to pressure you, I thought we should try to do the all night vigil tonight. Tokujirou-san's family by blood and marriage live together in this area, so there's nobody who would have to hurry in from far away."

"Yes."

"So with that said, if you could do the bedside sutras as soon as possible."

"I understand. I will speak with the head."

In the same community of Monzen, the Yasumori industries weren't on a lot that far from the temple. The eldest son of the Yasumori industry's Yasumori Tokujirou was the Maruyasu Sawmill's second son. Tokujirou founded the independent Yasumori Contracting firm, going into real estate from construction, with a scope that spread out to public works as well. In the present, the position of successor to the contractor's firm was now Mikiyasu's, with matters of real estate falling to Tokujirou's little brother who lived in the city, and the baton of public works were passed along with the city office to Tokujirou's adopted son-in-law.

It was a country business, and it might not have amounted to much compared to other personal success stories but Tokujirou himself was on the verge of 70 and an ever vigorous person himself still. None the less, when Seishin visited, that very Tokujirou had seemed beaten down where he sat by his daughter in law's bedside.

"Tokujirou-san, in these trying times...."

When Seishin spoke out to him, he wordlessly bowed his head. He grieved as if he had lost his own true daughter. Sitting in the chief mourner's seat, Mikiyasu held the small child and kept his eyes cast heavily downward. He could hear hidden sobs. Facing him, Setsuko, with red eyes, patiently stroked him.

Nao was his daughter in law, not Tokujirou's daughter. Setsuko was his second wife, so there was no blood between Setsuko and Mikiyasu. None the less, Tokujirou's household was one that anybody could be envious of. Both Mikiyasu and Nao were both like their blood children, Seishin knew he had been told.

"Setsuko-san, Mikiyasu-kun," Seishin spoke to both, going blank when he met the child's gaze, at a loss for words. Nao's first born son was Susume. Indeed he shouldn't have been more than three years old. "--My sincere condolences."

Without understanding the meaning of losing his mother, probably not understanding what was happening around him, Susumu tilted his head;

watching his simplistic demeanor, only perfunctory words could come forth. This very young child had lost his mother.

Tokujirou too, and Mikiyasu and Setsuko also seemed unable to let out their voices while holding in their wails. They gathered wordlessly, only bowing their heads deeply.

Seishin again could not make further words come. Seishin turned his eyes to Mikiyasu who let out a sob. His arms tightly holding onto the child were of course protecting the child, but there was something about it that also appeared as if he were clinging to the child in order to support himself. He'd seen an arm like that before. It was like that at the Shimizu house too. That had been tragic, and at the same time it looked foreboding. These people did not realize that something dangerous had entered into their own house.

---Where the children cry, the oni come.

In the village spread 'The Risen;---The legend of the oni were no doubt a metaphor for a plague. The oni had penetrated the Yasumori family. Those touched by the oni were infected with death, and death spread on out from there.

He felt like telling them to take care. I understand the feeling of wanting to mourn the departed. But, you mustn't cling to the body. Hurry, we have to put the body in the coffin and seal it up. He wanted to confess to everything, to tell them to take proper precautions, but.

But, reason whispered. If this is a plague, it's too late to warn them. Nao was dead. If this death was to continue then the Oni had probably already seized its next sacrifice.

sinnesspiel

6

That night after the all night vigil at the Yasumori house had ended, Seishin visited Toshio. At that time, Toshio was in his private room just looking over Nao's test results.

"Yo."

Toshio motioned Seishin who came through the rear courtyard as usual to come inside.

"Was Nao-san----as expected?"

To Seishin's question, Toshio nodded.

"Most likely, yeah. Nao-san came into the hospital on the 24th, and died this morning on the 27th. She was sick from the 23rd it seems, which would made it four days until she died. Overall no subjective symptoms but she got tired easily, her head was heavy, and she said she was spacing out. Anyway, as far as the exam went, it was thought to be anemia, and the test results said anemia. Other than the anemia there was nothing particularly wrong."

"That is like Megumi-chan was...."

"Right, the same pattern," Toshio nodded. "Really seemed spaced out, no matter what you asked, she didn't give any answers that hit on anything. Even using her mouth seemed troublesome, or maybe there was more the impression her attentions were diffused and she couldn't get her thoughts in order. This is like Megumi-chan's case, too."

"I see...."

"The blood tests on the 24th didn't show anything out of the ordinary besides the anemia. In normocytic normochromic anemia, all types of blood cells are fewer, looking at the net red blood cell counts. All kidney and liver functions

were within normal ranges; we looked for internal bleeding but we didn't find any of that either. On the other hand," Toshio motioned to the results pinned to the medical record. "These are the results from when she came into the hospital on the 26th. They came in today. Looking at this, everything's wrong all over. The kidney and liver functions are hugely out of normal ranges. Her anemia improved some but just the opposite everything but that got worse in exchange, it's like. And this morning she died. Looking at the corpse, she was slightly jaundiced, dropsy, ascites, and had other trends towards blood loss, with signs of liver and renal failure. She presented as if she'd been choking; in truth, when suctioning her respiratory tract, there was a froth of blood frmo the lungs in her airways. Respiratory failure due to a pulmonary edema due to heart failure. But, we took a EKG of this before too. At least the first time she came into the hospital, there was nothing to show signs of heart failure. There were no problems aside from the anemia, as few as three days before. From there she had a full body breakdown. The cause of death was suffocation from heart failure but, the heart failure itself was just what happened to become the trigger. Looking at the way it progressed, it wouldn't be strange if the liver or kidney or something else became the trigger. Rather than heart failure, it's like MOF---Multiple Organ Failure."

"....The chances of it being an epidemic are?"

"None. At least, according to the test results, they all turn up negative."

"It's that, then, huh...."

"More than likely, yeah. The first problems with her condition were ones you couldn't help but think were her suffering from the summer heat or a summer cold. From there it took a sudden, fatal turn for death but, its transition is obvious. From the time until it turns deadly to the first signs being anemia, it's incredibly similar to Megumi-chan's case."

"It begins with anemia?"

"The odds of that are high, I think. It might've been better to tell Ishida to rewrite the leaflets to say that anemia is common and to be careful. To list anemia's objective symptoms and what it feels like, and to come to the hospital right away if it looks like that."

Seishin nodded.

"I was barely able to ask her, and after asking Mikiyasu and putting it together, it doesn't seem like her original family had any chronic illnesses that fit the bill. Nao-san's real father was a deadbeat, and the ones who raised Nao-san were her uncle and his wife, but anyway as far as what I could get from Mikiyasu, I don't think there were any hereditary problems. I can't think of any particular lifestyle habits she'd had that would be a problem. She was a social drinker, and didn't smoke. She basically stayed in the village during her daily life, and aside from when she might have gone to Yamairi, she didn't go into the mountains. At most she'd go to Mizobe to do some shopping."

Seishin looked at the notebook page where Toshio had written 'Yasumori Nao.' As a doctor he'd asked all he could of the person and the family, and indeed nothing was left unchecked.

"The contractors don't use well water. It's not all from the above ground lines but only the air conditioner in the office uses ground water. It's the same as at the Maruyasu sawmill."

Seishin took notes while nodding. Yamairi didn't have waterworks. Gigorou and the Murasakos both used well water. At the Gotouda household, the drinking water was from the waterworks, but the bath water and laundry used well water. In Shimo-Sotoba where Megumi lived, most houses used waterworks but for farm works ground water was used, and just before Megumi had died she had been seen climbing the western mountains. If she had a normal habit of going into the mountains like that, she might have drank water from the swamp there. Putting those lines of thought together, it was possible to think that the source was in the water, but.

".....Wouldn't it be the water?"

"If you think about the contracting firm and Maruyasu, the odds are probably pretty low. The odds of it being something or another polluting the water or some kind of poisoning or contagion have pretty much been whittled down I think. There's still a chance that it might have first gotten to the person through water but water isn't the source of the contamination."

"So for example, the water in Yamairi may have been contaminated, and from

there the three in Yamairi were infected, and after that, direct transmission?"

Toshio nodded. "If we say water was the cause, that's what it'd come to but Megumi-chan and Giichi-san are the bottleneck. Thinking of the obvious, I can't think of how Megumi-chan would make contact with Yamairi or the three from there or Shuuji-san. It's just I can't say that for certain."

Seishin nodded. Megumi lived in Shimo-Sotoba but, as they knew from the day she had gone missing, here sphere of activity spanned the upper communities. It wasn't impossible that she met with the three from Yamairi or Shuuji by chance.

"Moreover the one who becomes a problem is Giichi-san. If Nao-san's case is the same thing, I can't think the source was anyone other than Giichi-san. If she was infected in the middle of august, this is right during the time when Giichi-san had died. According to Mikiyasu, Nao-san was always coming and going from the Maruyasu sawmill. She visited Giichi-san for a get-well visit three times or so, and on Bon the whole family was gathered at Maruyasu. Indeed smack in the middle of August. It wouldn't be strange at all for her to have caught it from Giichi-san. But, where Giichi-san would have caught it from I don't know. Giichi-san's sphere pf activity was just about nonexistent. He was totally bed ridden, after all. All I can think of is that it's possible one of the three from Yamairi or Shuuji-san had come to meet with Giichi-san but---"

"It doesn't seem so," Seishin shook his head and turned his eye to his notes. "I tried asking Atsuko-san from Maruyasu but it seems Shuuji-san and Giichi-san had no relations whatsoever. It seems he never set food in Maruyasu. It wasn't as if the three from Yamairi had no connection to Yamairi at all. Giichi-san did know them but, they weren't especially close. It seems they didn't take the trouble to come visit Giichi-san. If they had business with Maruyasu, they would incidentally pay Giichi-san a sick visit, incidents like that may have happened before, but Giichi-san was sick for a long time. Before, there had been customers who would visit Giichi-san but lately that had petered out, in current times, it seems."

"Seems so. That person'd been stuck in bed for six years or so now. When I came back, he was already bedridden and all."

Seishin nodded. "So, the ones who met with Giichi-san were largely only family

members. Particularly the people from the contractors. Also, people from the main Tamo family. Sadaichi-san seemed particularly close to Giichi-san. Then there were a few people he in his inner circle."

"No connection point then.... Is it impossible that it spreads directly after all?" Toshio sighed as if fed up. "---And the others?"

As he was being urged, Seishin opened the folded up notes and presented them.

"For the three in Yamairi and the Gotouda household, their families are spread out and I don't know the specifics. .... But." Seishin repeated the story he'd heard at Chigusa. That the day before Shuuji fell ill, he'd gone to Yamairi and Gigorou had left Sotoba, that when he'd come back he'd seemed off.

"Shuuji-san went to Yamairi on the second, huh..." Toshio made a sullen face. "That's certainly something. If it was the second, Hidemasa-san should have been dead. Shuuji-san shouldn't have seen a dead body, if he did, he would have called somebody. That he didn't means he visited but didn't see them, but."

"That's right."

"But Mieko-san was there wasn't she? She wasn't doing well and her husband was dead next to her. If she was having a lapse in consciousness due to liver failure, she might have ignored that someone came to visit. It's possible she might have just been asleep, and not noticed that Shuuji-san had come but..."

"Then there's Gigorou-san. ---Say, couldn't we think that Gigorou-san brought something in from outside of Sotoba? And then it was something that Shuuji-san caught in Yamairi."

"I wonder." Toshio twisted his neck. "Of course, there's the incubation period to consider too. For influenza the average time is two days, for cholera, it usually breaks out in a day or two too but. Still, thinking of it like that, where Fuki-san caught it, I wouldn't know."

"That's true. Did Fuki-san catch it from Shuuji-san...."

"I can't say for sure, but. it might be like Japanese encephalitis." When Seishin tilted his head, he continued. "Japanese encephalitis is carried by mosquitoes. It doesn't spread from person to person. If that's the case, there might be that

possibility, too."

"Actually," Toshio said poking a finger down on the medical records. "Thinking about it from the end, when the organs all start to break down, it's like something starts in the blood and effects all the other organs. If it comes in through the digestive tracts or the respiratory system, it wouldn't be impossible for the pathogen to invade through the blood, and if that's the case, then at first it may seem to appear as a response to something foreign in the digestive or respiratory systems. But, there's no symptoms of vomiting or diarrhea. If we think of it like this, we can reason that it's a point blank blood-based infection."

"From a wound?"

"Right. Actually, when Megumi-chan fell in the mountains, she had countless little scrapes and scratches. Nao-san didn't have any particular injuries but she had countless mosquito bites. I think there's a possibility it spreads through an animal as an intermediary like Japanese encephalitis. Not person to person, but moquitos or fleas, or ticks as intermediaries. If we consider that, it explains the lack of contact between Megumi-chan and Giichi-san."

That said, Toshio pointed at Seishin. "I can't deny that possibility. You be careful."

"Why?"

"Why?" Toshio said eyes wide in frustration. "Yamairi, right? Megumi-chan was found around the mountains in the Maruyasu back yard. Nao-san's house is a little separated from there but she came and went from the Maruyasu Sawmill. The Maruyasu Sawmill is at the foot of your guys' mountain."

"That.... is true, but?"

"It's all around the northern mountain. There's a chance the intermediary carriers are coming from the northern mountain and spreading out. Yamairi's on the other side of the northern mountain, and Megumi-chan was found just at the place where the northern mountain and western mountain meet up."

Seishin nodded. Certainly in that area the mountain stream flowed towards Yamairi in a loophole shape. When Seishin was small, there was a direct wire line

down between the Maruyasu sawmill from Yamairi, a lumber path. As forestry declined, now there wasn't anybody elft who used it, and already the path was grown over with underbrush but that path that followed the mountain stream was still plenty cleared enough for animals to use it. ---For example, wild dogs and the like.

Seishin remembered the disastrous scene at Yamairi. "Wild dogs?"

"We could think that way. The dead didn't have any bite wounds while they were alive, so it can't be that the wild dogs are transmitting it but it is possible that the wild dogs have fleas or ticks that do. Just earlier, the Ohkawa Liquor shop's son was bitten by a wild dog. Before that, the Inoda's Motosaburou-san I think it was was attacked by a wild dog. It is true that the wild dogs in the surrounding mountains are multiplying. Those who go into the mountains seem to be tremblingly afraid of it. From the gossip the people who come in for exams say, they've been multiplying in Yamairi and coming down south, it sounds like. There was a patient just recently who mentioned seeing three wild dogs just above the shrine area and all."

"Do you think there's a need to hunt for wild dogs?"

Toshio pondered. "There is a chance the wild dogs are carrying a disease. I'd need to do research..." That said, Toshio let out a huge sigh. "But, the hell'm I supposed to research? If I'm supposed to catch a wild dog and see if it's housing a pathogen or not, then not even knowing what that pathogen is is kinda, well."

"That's true."

"Well, rounding up the wild dogs in the area just in case wouldn't hurt anything but the problem's what kind of reason to give. If we do it carelessly, we might just be stirring the pot but the cause isn't limited to dogs. It's pretty risky."

Seishin nodded. He couldn't deny that the chance to use Ohkawa Atsushi and Inoda Motosaburou's cases as an impetus was long passed. Using those as the reason would seem out of place more than likely.

"This isn't something we can push using the next time someone's attacked as a chance, either."

"But..."

"This isn't just about exposing that there's an plague. It's easy for you to say wild dog hunting but how do you assure the safety of the people actually doing it? The people who go out to round the wild dogs up might be prepared for their teeth but they're not going to be ready for the ticks and fleas are they? If we're going to have them doing that, then we'd need to give them detailed instructions about the plague from the start."

"What about poison bait?"

"That's just changing which part's risky. Let's say the intermediary's fleas. But, once the dog dies, they'll leave its corpse. While we're doing that kind of extermination, unless we have a way to wipe them out too, then instead we won't be able to stop the spread of fleas."

"Is that right," said Seishin, biting his lip.

"Well... the wild dogs might be the ones carrying the disease but, there's the possibility that it's not just them, too. Rats and rabbits, maybe even wild birds. And the fleas and ticks attached to them.

If that's the case," said Toshio, his voice low, "we're going to have a hard time."

sinnesspiel

Links to Chapter 2

Chapter 2 - 1

Chapter 2 - 2

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Chapter 2 - 6

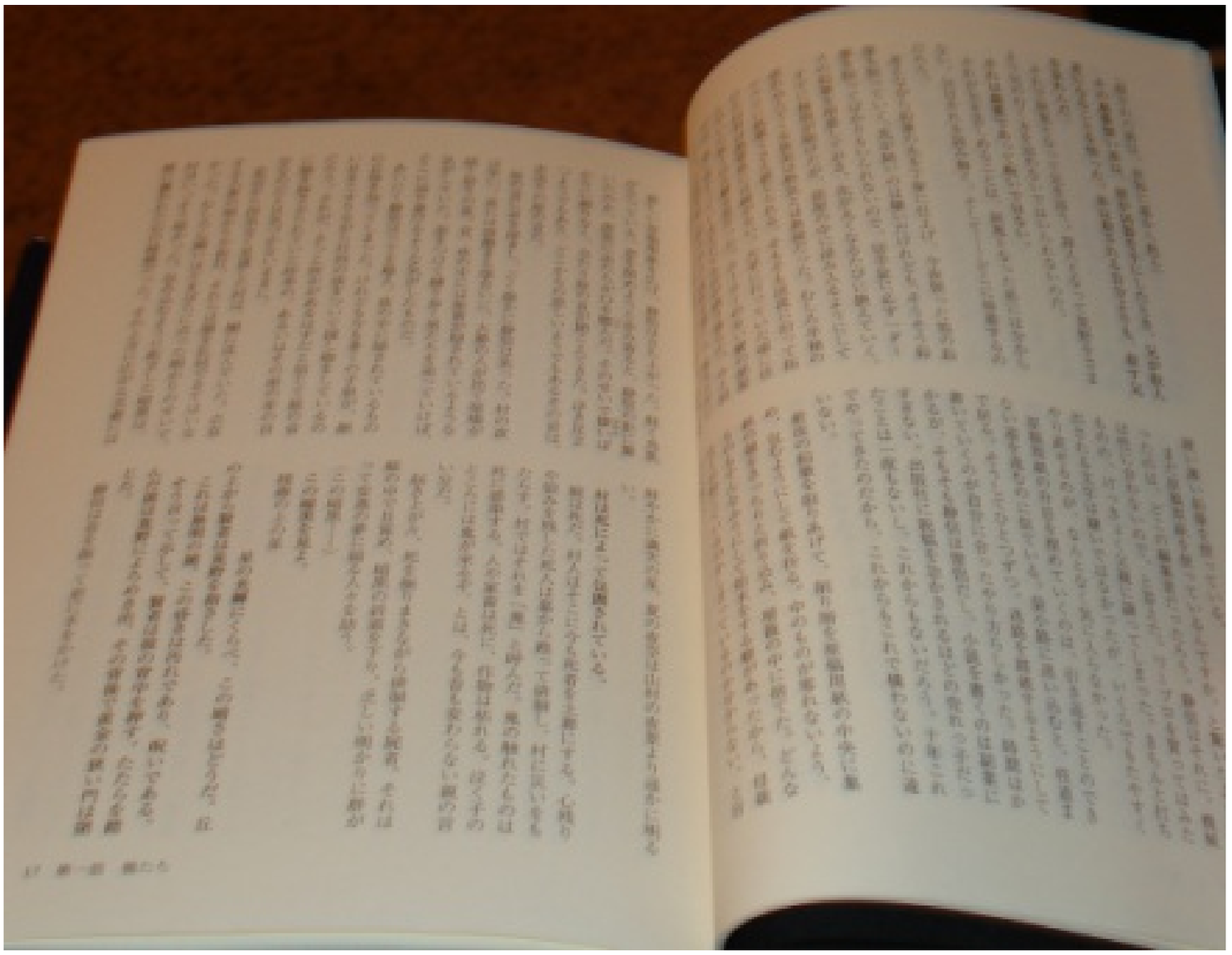
No cultural notes this chapter, unless I've overlooked something!

So instead I'll give a visual progress report:

These are the two volumes of Shiki, with a roll of toilet paper beside them for size reference.

The bookmark shows where we are in Volume 1 right now, at the end of Part 2,

Chapter 2.6, page 351.

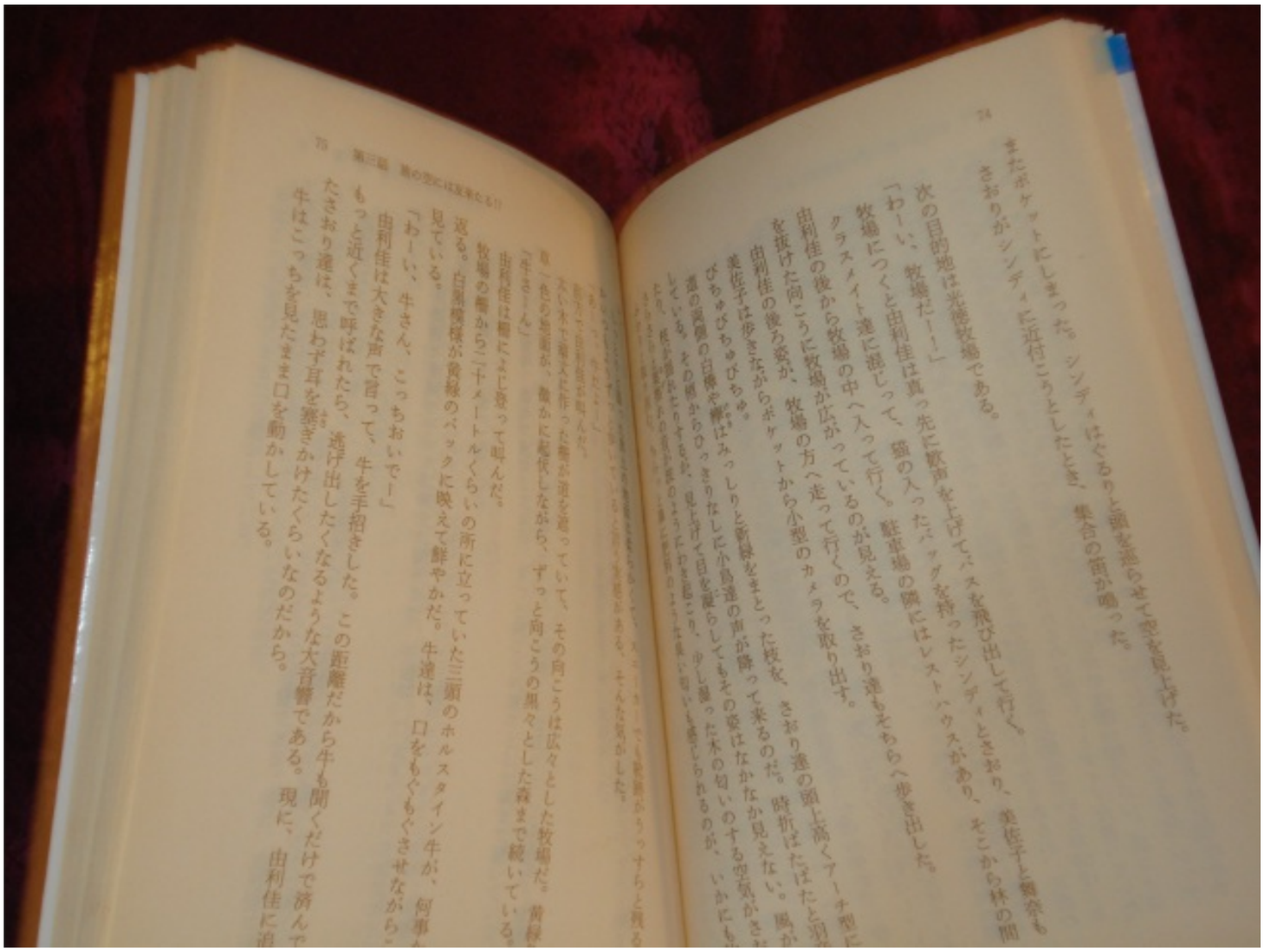


This is an internal shot; pages are double-layer printed. Keep this in mind when comparing the time it takes to translate light novels that don't look so much thinner.

「あたしだって」
「結婚しようか」
「うん……」
短絡的と言ってしまえば短絡的だが、それは純粋さのなせるわざだ。
電撃的なスピードで、ふたりはラムネが一八歳になったとき結婚することを決めてしまったのだった。

結婚式まであと一日。
そう、明日のラムネの誕生日がふたりの結婚式の日だ。
段取りはすべて済んでいる。
この日に合わせて、時空を超えて、アララ王国からミルクの父親のヨッコーラ三世、姉のカフェオレ、ココア、そして勇者ラムネスのアドバイザーロボットだったタマQがやってくることになっていた。

ところで、父親であるヨッコーラ三世には少し悩みがある。ときどき差異がドキドキスペースとマジマジワールドでは時間の流れが相対的でない。



These are a Knights of Ramune & 40 Fire novel and a Sotsugyou II (Graduation: Neo Generation) novel, respectively. Print size and spacing is typical. In terms of sheer physical thickness, the average light novel looks to be about 3/4ths the length of a single Shiki novel and they usually come in at 250-300 pages, but the print size and spacing makes the difference in volume more pronounced than that. In the 5 volume larger print version, each part comes out to about 500 pages. In typical light novel printing standards, we'd be around 700 pages.

Coincidentally this is why I predict another two years or so to completion; you might look at the current rate of progress and think "We're more than halfway through book 1. By June, couldn't we be done with book 1 and maybe even have a start into book 2, which could then be conquered in about another year for a year and a half?" Those extra 200 pages that make book 2 longer than 1 are nothing to scoff at, since they come out to about 4x as much volume per page as a typical light novel.

sinnesspiel

2

And so it came to be that by the sin of slaughtering his little brother he was exiled to wander the wasteland. Never to return to that splendor, roaming the desolate earth, yet that sin followed him over the wastelands. His sin was the form of his little brother who had become a Shiki; it followed him, to make him suffer for an eternity.
No, where his brothers aims lied, he did not know. All the more did it pile onto his sufferings. As to why, it was because he did in his own way love his little brother, and he loathed his momentary impulse. His little brother was systematically favored. Deep with love, knowing compassion, like a vessel of splendor to others was his little brother. The people loved his little brother and longed for him. He, too, could not but. The people detested he who had fatally wounded the soul of such deep love but, he again in that same pattern detested himself.
His little brother's eyes of compassion turned on him endlessly cascaded his guilt and regret. His sadness at losing his brother, the lamentations over that death, his hatred of the deceased, his hatred of his own sin compounded his own unyielding selfloathing. Sadness and deterioration, sharper than the frozen winds, tore at him for infinity.

Seishin sighed and threw out the manuscript he had read. The mood wasn't coming to him at all. His pen strokes were superficial and repetitive, his consciousness idling back around to the memos.

Giving in and putting up the Japanese writing paper, he put it away into the drawer. Arranging it face down and placing a paperweight on them, in exchange he took out the notebook from another drawer. Gotouda Shuuji, Ohkawa Gigorou, Murasako Hidemasa, ... ten people. And newly added, Yasumori Nao and Ohta Kenji. Even now as he did this, it was spreading out somewhere through Sotoba. They were being slowly driven to a cliff's edge but Seishin and the others couldn't sense its movements.

(Is it all right to be doing this now?)

Seishin had no qualifications to investigate the situation. Unable to even allude to the situation, there was a limit to how much he could ask people in conversation. As expected, it was best to pass it on even a step sooner if possible to the appropriate source, wouldn't it? So he felt. Even Toshio might have been a doctor but he was not an epidemiologist Rather than an amateur doctor and a complete layman floundering about, he thought the obvious thing to do was quickly entrust it to a specialist in order to discern the situation and cope with it.

But, thought the other party.

If a specialist investigated the circumstances it would be fast work but, the probability that the circumstances would worsen was indeed high. If they knew it was a plague, the villagers would be uneasy. Am I, is my family all right? The uneasy villagers would, without a doubt, go to the Ozaki clinic. To get comfort from Toshio. The more people acted like that in tandem, the more the situation would spread. Not only would they have needless anxiety, they wouldn't be able to help drawing in unnecessary anxiety.

(No...)

To begin with, it wasn't yet even determined for certain that it was an epidemic. They didn't by any means have a solid handle on what was happening. There was the feeling it was a plague, the thought that it couldn't be, the unease that came from thinking 'if', and the irritation at being unable to confirm any one of those things.

As he stared at the notes in thought, the phone rang. Seishin looked behind him over the back of the office chair, pulling the phone on the office desk towards himself. On the other end was the bookstore's Tashiro.

"Ah, Masa-san."

It has been a while, Seishin tried to say as Tashiro interrupted.

"Seishin, have you heard? The resident officer Takami-san died, they said."

Eh, Seishin's eyes widened.

"--Takami-san? It can't be."

"That's, but it's true! This evening an ambulance came. Wondering what was up I went out to the front of the shop, and Takami-san was being carried out from the police substation."

Takami's wife, Hideko, had boarded the ambulance too. There were two children at Takami's place but when he asked them, Takami had suddenly collapsed they said. Since yesterday he had had a cold and was laid up in bed but he went to go to the bathroom when it seems he fainted. At any rate, unable to leave the kids alone, Tashiro Rumi stayed at the residential station to watch over them but not long after Takami Hideko returned. When asked what happened, she answered that Takami had died.

"Anyways, his wife seemed spaced out, ---like she was distracted, could you say? She wasn't in a state to ask her for details. I mean, I don't know the particulars but you guys have a deep connection with Takami-sam too, so I thought it'd be better to let you know."

Seishin swallowed down something bitter. "He had a cold and was bedridden?"

"Mm. Seems like it." Said Tashiro, his voice not inviting any particular unease. But, Seishi could feel the sweat rising up. ---A bad premonition.

"Those guys though, you know, even if they lived in the substation, they're not from Sotoba. They're not in a funeral group, I was wondering what we'd do."

"That... is true, isn't it."

"Either way I'd say we'd help if it came to it but, anyway for the time being, we contacted the family and the family said they'd take care of it. Probably they'll ask a funeral home in Mizobe and have him cremated, I guess, huh? Anyway, his wife herself was saying to leave her alone, so Rumi and me came back, but."

"Thank you very much. At any rate, I will contact his wife."

Yeah, if you could, said Tashiro, hanging up the phone.

Seishin immediately phoned the substation. But, listening to it ring fifteen times, there was no answer. Did they leave to go to the hospital? Hanging up the receiver, he made another call, to Toshio. He tried to the hospital---which after

hours and on days off switched to the house line--but Toshio did not pick up. Hesitating a moment then calling the house line, Takae picked up and answered, voice nasal and stiff, that he was out.

"Would you happen to know to where he had set out?"

"I don't. There was a call at the hospital, and then he left. Wouldn't it be a house call?"

It was possible that it was a call conveying news of Takami's death. So he might have gone out to the substation. While hesitating on whether he should try going there, there was a call from Toshio.

In the background there were the sound of people making a fuss and he could faintly hear Dixie. It seemed he was calling from creole.

As expected, Toshio hurried to the substation. And when he did, there was nobody at the substation, he said.

"People from around said they say the wide take the kids in the car. They may have gone to get the body or to drop the kids off at her parents place, something like that."

Right, Seishin answered but, somehow he wasn't fully convinced.

"Anyway, I don't know any specifics. I won't until his wife comes back."

That's true, Seishin answered before lowering his voice. "---Do you think it's that?"

Toshio's voice lowered all the more.

"Probably, yeah."

sinnesspiel

3

They were entering the calendar month of September but she didn't think that the lingering summer heat was abating in the slightest.

As Ritsuko left the hospital, a heat haze reflected off of the parking lot baking in the midday sun. There may have been some moisture in the air recently; it was sultry as if boiling.

"Uwa--, it's hot!" Yuuki said, hurrying towards her car, a toy like Forme. The car's window was left open. It wasn't like there was anyone who'd steal a car in Sotoba anyway.

"Ritsuko-san, it's hot, is that all right?"

"It's fine," Ritsuko answhered. When Ritsuko said she was going to go out to the shopping district a bit and would be back, Yuki had said that if that was the case, she'd give her a ride halfway there. The car that had been scorching in the parking lot was probably hotter than the road top but it was far better than walking beneath the scorching hot rays.

Gratefully getting into the car, she was taken to the edge of the shopping district. First deciding to have lunch, she opened the door to creole.

She took in a relieved breath at the soft sounds of piano and the air conditioned air. From here to the hospital didn't even take ten minutes by car. Due to that, the car's air conditioning didn't have time to start working, and in just that amount of time the back of her blouse was wet.

"Good day."

"Ah, Ricchan."

Hasegawa, almost as if he had been expecting her, raised his face eagerly. At the counter sat the book store's Tashiro. Haswgawa invited Ritsuko to the seat next to him.

"You came at a good time. Ricchan, have you heard from the doctor about

what happened at Takami-san's place?"

"Takami-san---the resident officer? No."

She heard the story that Takami had died. With that the nurses felt all the more uneasy. But beyond that, she didn't remember hearing what happened to Takami.

"Really? The Junior Doctor is no the crime prevention committee and all. I thought you might've heard something, but. Coffee?"

"Iced. And a lunch special. ---What happened to Takami-san?"

That's, started Hasegawa exchanging looks with Tashiro. The one to talk was Tashiro.

"They moved, Takami-san."

Ritsuko tilted her head.

"I mean, at Takami-san's place, I haven't caught sight of his wife since then. Takami-san died, she came back from the hospital and said that. Then with that she took the kids somewhere at night and hasn't been back to the house. We were thinking if she needed help with the funeral or something, we'd lend a hand and all, and even if they didn't need help, we should at least light an incense stick for him, I'd thought. But since then we haven't seen her at all."

"My...."

"Then, last night, suddenly there's a light on in the house. ---Well, that's just what I'd heard from the neighbors when I got back to the house, but. Just when I thought they'd finally come back, there's a Takasago pine moving truck in front of the station, no sign of the wife and kids, and a young guy I'd never seen before."

"Were they a moving company? It can't be, they moved? At night?"

"That's right. And at a pretty late hour. It was Mori-san from the pharmacy who saw it, and he said we're talking around twelve o'clock."

"That late at night, was it?"

"Mm. That young guy---he's called Sasaki but anyway it looks like he's the

replacement. Takami-san in the end seems to have gone back to his home for the funeral. So, his successor was picked and moved in. It seems like that Sasaki was asked by his wife to take care of the move. Even so, they moved out the clothes and the personal stuff but, like, the furniture was just left where it was. Sasaki-san said it was passed on for him to use, it seems."

"It's all so sudden, isn't it."

"Ain't it? No greetings to anyone around, it was a shock. We were all looked after by Takami-san, we were all waiting for a chance to see him off in a way, like."

And furthermore, said Hasegawa following up on Tashiro.

"This successor called Sasaki had a weird feeling to him. How to put it---his eyes were fixed, and he didn't have a very good countenance to him, it seems. So, Mori-san, for a moment, thought that talk of being his replacement was made up or something. At any rate, it seems he's single, he said."

Is that so, Ritsuko murmured. "I wonder if a replacement would be decided on this quickly."

While listening to Hasegawa say, that's right, in her mind,

Ritsuko tilted her head.

It wasn't completely random by any means. But still something about it was very queer. A sudden move, and in the dead of night. And Takami's family wasn't there, a stranger was standing in. Leaving the furniture, carrying out the luggage, boarding it on the truck----

Vaguely imagining the state of affairs, RItsuko spoke to herself.

"Takasago pine...."

There was a crest with that Takasago pine on it wasn't there? ---Takasago Movers. She remembered hearing that name.

"Hm?"

Urged by Tashiro, Ritsuko spoke. "Takasago pine, that's Takasago Movers, isn't

it?"

"You know them? I guess they're a famous moving company."

"That isn't it.... In our neighborhood recently there was a move. It was in one day, so it was very sudden."

The mother and child Shinoda from Kami-Sotoba had moved.

"It's a similar story. In the middle of the night, a truck pulled in, and suddenly, they had moved. Without any words of parting to the neighbors. It was so sudden, there were even people wondering if they were running away from something in the middle of the night."

"Heeh. That really is a similar story."

"That was Takasago Moving after all, I was thinking. The name is so auspicious, using it to flee into the night, we had been saying."

"Takasago Moving?"

Yes, Ritsuko nodded. "It's a strange symbol isn't it, that. Is it possible that they're movers who only work at night, I wonder." Saying that, Ritsuko seemed to laugh at her own words. "....That can't be, there's no such thing."

Hasegawa and Tashiro, even while laughing exchange bewilgered glances. Here you are, said Hasegawa, serving up a salad.

"This place is somewhat strange, this village. Whether it be strange moves or strange outsiders." Saying that, Hasegawa wore a wry smile as if remembering that he himself was an outsider.

"Come to think of it, Kanemasa moved in in the middle of the night, too. Is it becoming a fad, I wonder?"

"It couldn't be. ...And on top of that, the deaths keep coming. Shimizu-san's place's Megumi-chan and Takami-san, in succession, aren't they? Hirosawa-san was saying that the mourning crew's work kept coming."

Without thinking, Ritsuko found herself staring back at Hasegawa. For a moment, she had thought Hasegawa had said it like it was a joke. But Hasegawa's face that she stared into was quite serious. It really did feel unease. ----But.

As if remembering something in looking at Ritsuko's face, Hasegawa waved his hand. "Aa, right, right. Yamairi, you know. In Yamairi, the elderly died, didn't they."

Ritsuko swallowed a breath. Those weren't the only ones who died. Hasegawa didn't know. It was understandable, if you didn't know them, you wouldn't receive notice of their death. So not knowing about Gotouda Shuuji or his mother Fuki's death was natural, and not knowing abuot Yasumori Giichi or Yasumori Nao's deaths might have been as much of a given as given could be. It might have been overheard somewhere but it wouldn't stick in one's memory, likely.

(That's not all.)

Without thinking, a taste developed in Ritsuko's mouth. Gotouda Shuuji, Fuki, Yasumori Giichi, Nao, the three in Yamairi and Megumi, plus Takami made for a sum of nine people. That number was abnormal.

--But, even Ritsuko who thought as much didn't by any means know the true count.

sinnesspiel

4

Toshio was awakened by the phone. Eyes open, he didn't have the resolve to get up out of the bed. An early morning phone call was a death notice. That was what Toshio learned this summer.

"---Yes?"

When he answered, what was in the back of Toshio's mind was not 'Something happened, didn't it?' but instead 'Someone died, didn't they?'

On the 29th he heard that Ohta Kenji died from Seishin. The next day, on the 30th, Takami's death notice came in. After that, the day before yesterday, the 5th, he had just been contacted by Ishida saying that on the 4th Saeki Akira in Sotoba died.

"This is Yasumori, the contractors."

The one on the other end of the phone was the contractor's Setsuko. Then, somebody caught it from Nao, Toshio thought. What's happened, he asked, but this was nothing more than an empty sound put out into the conversation to convey that he understood.

"Susumu---something is wrong with my grandson. He's limp, even if we shake him his eyes won't open. He's blue..."

"I'll be right there. In the mean time, call an ambulance."

Hanging up the phone on Setsuko's tear-mingled voice saying 'yes' Toshio got dressed. When he rushed out of the house and sped by car to the contractor's firm, Susumu was still breathing.

His breath was shallow and fast. Rather than being short of breath, it was clear he was hyperventilating. In the middle of treating him his breath stopped. Acidosis from hyperventilation, probably. When Toshio confirmed that his heart had stopped, the ambulance finally arrived.

"His heart's stopped. Just now, hurry!" he instructed to the ambulance crew.

She must have heard that, as Setsuko's voice cried out in a loud wail.

"Susumu---is he dead?" Yasumori Tokujiro clung to him with a shaking hand.

"It isn't impossible for him to be resuscitated yet." While answering, Toshio's brows furrowed. Setsuko and Tokujirou were in a frenzy over their grandson. His all important father himself, Mikiyasu, watched over that with oddly glazed eyes. He didn't seem to be dismayed in the slightest.

"Mikiyasu, you all right?"

Leaving Susumu to the ambulance crew, Toshio went to Mikiyasu's side. Losing his wife and his child in the course of one summer---he was a man who was losing everything. But, Mikiyasu's expression showed no change. A vacant, absent-minded stare leveled over his son.

"Mikiyasu, ---oi."

As if trying to convey something, Mikiyasu nodded.

"You, how're you feeling?"

Mikiyasu nodded mechanically, then, as if suddenly remembering to do so, murmured.

"Is Susumu, dead, Toshio-san?"

While hesitant to answer with yes or to answer with no, Toshio peered at Mikiyasu's face. The strange look in his eyes must have been because of the blued nature of the whites of his eyes. Looking at him up close, his breath was shallow. Taking his pulse, it was clear he had tachycardia.

"Mikiyasu."

"Toshio-san, last night, like..." Mikiyasu's mouth faintly frowned, his eyes still vacant. "Susumu talked in his sleep. Mama, he said." He murmured in a disinterested voice. "Then he woke up. Those.... were the last words I'll hear from Susumu, I guess..."

Toshio gripped Mikiyasu's hand. His fingertips were cold. His arm in his lap had nodes here and there on them that looked the same as Nao's.

"Wait a sec," Toshio turned back, calling to stop the ambulance personnel

carrying Susumu out. "Him too. Take this guy to the National Hospital."

Tokujirou and Setsuko who were following Susume out stopped and turned.

"Junior Doctor---"

"I don't know the details but tell them out there that he has aplastic anemia or acute leukemia."

The EMS crew looked at each other in surprise and brought in the stretcher. In the mean time, Toshio took out a syringe.

"Mikiyasu, put out your arm."

As if he weren't the first to be doing this, the left arm with the tourniquet already had nodes over the veins. Avoiding those he stabbed the needle in and withdrew a peripheral blood sample.

"Junior Doctor, is Mikiyasu---"

Toshio looked into Tokujirou's panicked face.

"It's not confirmed or anything. It's just in a worst case scenario, that might be the case."

"But..."

"It's just a precaution. ---Now, go with Susumu-kun and Mikiyasu."

Toshio took the peripheral blood sample back and sent out half of it to the Yajima Health Institute for testing, affixing a label to it and storing it safely. The other half he took towards the examination room. His hematocrit values were down, hemoglobin concentration decreased, clearly anemia, but by looking at the smear sample, the erythrocyte count was high.

"...It's that."

"---Susumu-kun? The contractor's boy?"

While changing into her nurse's uniform, Yasuyo's eyes were wide. Ritsuko nodded.

"It seems like it was this morning. Mikiyasu-san appeared to be sick too, so he was transported to the National Hospital in Mizobe."

I see, said Yasuyo, in a low voice mixed with a sigh she couldn't help. Nagata Kiyomi let out a deep sigh as she affixed her nurse's cap in her hair.

"...The poor things. But, this is shaping up to be the real thing."

"It sure is," Yasuyu nodded. "The wife, the son, and the husband in a row. It's an epidemic."

Kiyomi nodded. "It's been on my mind for a while, so I'd been turning books inside out, but I can't figure out what it is. No matter how you look at it, it seems suspicious, but each one I've looked at seems different from this one."

"We aren't doctors, after all. ... ...But, it doesn't show many symptoms, does it?"

Yasuyo who answered looked as if she too had researched and researched with no results.

"I wonder if we'll be all right?"

To Ritsuko's question, Yasuyo gave an utterly uninvolved seeming smile.

"It's no use the bunch of us getting worried. The Junior Doctor is well aware. We'll be fine if we just work as the Junior Doctor says. That's our job, after all! .... But, well, I hope nothing terrible happens, still."

"I hope we can keep it under control," Kiyomi said once again with a sigh. "If we don't handle this well, it's going to get even busier, ... from here on."

"I'm not grateful for it, but that's the job so it can't be helped. If there are patients, we follow the doctor's orders, that's our duty. If the doctor feels like he's managing somehow, then we can't very well say that it's too mysterious and we don't know so we're running away, now can we?"

That's true, Kiyomi smiled. Ritsuko, too, somehow managed a smile. They were the nurses with seniority, so that they were so firm was reassuring. They were firm in what they must do, enough so to brag about it.

"I'm sorry. I just became a little panicked."

Yasuyo gave a carefree smile. "That's bound to happen. Well, just be sure to eat well and keep up your strength. If you don't take care of yourself, you'll lose this test of strength!"

"I wonder if we might lose weight?"

At Kiyomi's interruption, Yasuyo gave a hearty laugh.

"Well, that would be a plus. ---But, while we might become shapely, Ricchan would probably just become a stick."

Ritsuko smiled. "Surely if that happens, the doctor will become nothing but a shadow."

"Without a doubt!"

Laughing, Ritsuko came out of the locker room towards the break room. That was when the part timer Miki called out to stop her. Behind Miki, Fujou lingered looking unease.

"Uhm, say, Ricchan, we had heard that the contractor's boy had died, but."

"It seems like he did, didn't he."

"I wonder if things are all right. ... I mean, doesn't it seem like we keep hearing about all these deaths?"

Fujou seconded her, flustered. "I wonder if some terrible disease isn't spreading. We have a small grand child at my house, too..."

Ritsuko smiled. "I think that the doctor is aware of what is happening. If you can't help worrying, then perhaps we should try consulting the doctor about it?"

"Ah, ... that's right."

Miki murmured, turning back towards Fujou. Fujou nodded but did not seem satisfied.

"If you would like, I could convey to him that Miki-san and the others are worried for you."

"If you would be such a dear."

Miki and Fujou bowed their heads to her.

"The doctor has not said anything yet, but just in case, please be careful when taking out the medical waste."

The two nodded as if clinging to her words.

sinnesspiel

5

Seishin lit the fire in the lamp. The dark light shone over the inside of the abandoned church building.

The old style oil lamp was something that had been left behind here. Not just the lamp, the personal items belonging to the recluse who had formerly lived inside the church were all left behind. Clothing smeared in dust and mouse droppings, books rotting with mold, everything that had come to comfort him for use in his daily life.

The reason Seishin had originally started coming here was because of these things, because Seishin enjoyed reading over the things offered up by the person who dedicated himself here to living out his own individualistic faith in this sanctuary. He would chip at them uniformly, though he couldn't follow any chain of reasoning that would really give a gap into a single certain personality, but he sought out the meaning behind each and every article, taking great interest in the task of seeking out whether one item would reveal the meaning to another and tie something together.

Books on black magic and curses, another was a book on history, a dubious religious pamphlet. Mixed in with those were physics and biology books, and mixed in with those were guileless moral stories aimed and children.

He didn't know what he was thinking amassing this collection of books. Just--- thought Seishin. There was no doubt that he admired martyrs. He wanted to be a martyr to something and yet what to actually become a martyr for, he himself may not have even known. He had been here always, searching for a divinity to which to devote himself. If that wasn't the case, then he may have been seeking the words to express the personal god he had found through his own intuition.

He was drug out of here and brought back, and, he thought, he probably couldn't find what he was looking for there. When he had first discovered this

place, he had sought out information on the person who had lived in Kanemasa but in the chaos after the war he had gone missing and today still what had become of him after that remained unknown. If he had found the divinity which he was meant to serve, he wanted to know about it, he thought.

While thinking on that, he opened a spotted book, when he'd heard a soft clattering sound. In the light of the lamp, he turned his gaze towards the entrance where the sound had been made, seeing Sunako's face peeking in.

"---Muroi-san?"

Seishin closed the book, surprised. Sunako came towards the bench with a light stepped gait.

"I had seen the light and thought that it might have been you. I could see from the window of my house."

"Ah, ... I see."

"Do you remember your promise? I have brought the book. I wonder if I could have you sign it for me?"

Seishin nodded and took in hand the book Sunako had brought out. It was the second book Seishin had published. It was still a well bound book, but this book shouldn't have been in circulation any longer. Had it been treated with so much care? Opening the book, he signed the flyleaf page. It was something of a rarity but the people of the parish had often asked for his signature, though lately they did not. He found himself a little self-conscious.

"Thank you. I'll treasure it."

The lamp light shone over the happily smiling little girl's face.

After meeting last time, he'd tried researching about SLE. Systemic lupus erythematosus. In Japan it was classified as a collagen disease but more precisely it was a type of connective tissue disease. That said, Seishin couldn't imagine very concretely what kind of connective tissue it was. There were many young women with it, as most of the patients inflicted were female. It seemed it was something that could be passed down through the family but it seemed it wasn't clear if it was genetic or not. The primary symptoms were characteristic red spots on the skin and joint pain for this illness but it afflicted the entire body. A

particular problem was decreased kidney function and decreased cardio-pulmionary function. There was full body weakness and a tendency towards infection, and lesions in the brain and nervous system could also happen. They were sensitive to ultraviolet rays, which could lead to an outbreak, which could lead to serious illness, kidney decline and cardio-pulmionary decline leading to uremia, valvular diseases, and inflammation of the pericardium, which could become life threatening. Abnormalities in the immunte system was the designated cause but what caused the outbreaks was unclear, and there was no set medical treatment. Forced to battle the illness all throughout one's life, because returning to society or work was difficult, it was designated as an incurable disease.

Maybe it was because he knew that, maybe it was because of the unsteady light of the lamp, a melancholy shadow seemed to settle over the little girl's face.

"Your complexion looks poor."

"Does it? ---I suppose it may. For a while I was bedridden."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm already quite used to it."

The little girl faintly shrugged her shoulders. Her pale white skin looked sickly but there were no signs of the characteristic red spots. It seemed the primary medical treatment for SLE was steroids, and taking doses of it for a long time could have severe side effects but for the time being Sunako didn't have the well known side effect characteristics of a full moon face or a the outward appearance of a buffalo. Aside from a poor complexion, she looked quite healthy. He wrote that off as being how it looked to a layman's eyes.

But, Seishin thought. Sunako's life was hanging upon a delicate balance. Yes, life was fragile, more so than people believed. Yasumori Susumu had died. It was possible that Mikiyasu, too, would not come back alive.

(Mikiyasu... ...)

Four years younger, he lived nearby. The temple and the Yasumoris had a deep connection. When they were smaller, they often played together. You could even call him a childhood friend.

That summer, many villagers died. There were those he knew and those he did not. But as for somebody like Mikiyasu, it was the first time someone he felt a co-ownership with had fallen. If it was that, then Mikiyasu wouldn't be saved. The last time they met would be at Nao's funeral, then? It was possible that he would never see Mikiyasu alive again. The next time they met, Mikiyasu would be an empty shell, and he would be the ones performing the last rites over that Mikiyasu's empty shell.

"Did somebody die again?"

Asked by Sunako, Seishin returned to his senses.

"... ... Why?"

"Because you were like this before, too. You said that some young girl had died. Muroi-san looks to be depressed the same as he had been at that time."

I see, Seishin forced a smile.

"A person of the parish?"

"Yes,"

Seishin nodded.

"He hasn't died yet. But... ...he's on the verge of death."

Was it all right to say that? But, there was no hope at all of him recovering.

"He is a member of the parish but, if I had to label him, I should probably go with childhood friend."

"Heeh?"

Seishin took a small, short breath.

"When we were small we played together often. Or rather, he came over asking to play often, might be more precise. He is four years younger."

"He was like your child." Sunako wore a moderate smile.

"That might have been how it was. I was more of a reserved child, afflicted with a terrible shyness, and there weren't any children besides Toshio that I was very close with."

"Toshio-san?"

"The director of the Ozaki Hospital. I got along well with Toshio myself but Toshio was very competitive. He wasn't the type to know his place with the older children, he was vigorous, so Toshio and I ended up stuck playing alone together. Toshio didn't get along well with the older kids but he got along well with younger ones. He could say some very outrageous things, and when he was in the mood he could be very cruel and hard hearted but you could say they looked up to that."

"A stereotypical child bully, wasn't he?" Sunako smiled. "But, somehow I simply can't picture Muroi-san playing together with a child bully. Somehow, I have the impression that as a child you did nothing but read books by yourself."

"It wasn't like that. I got up to a lot of mischief," Seishin smiled. "Though usually the one who brought it up was Toshio. He'd plan some terrible prank, or plan some incredibly reckless way to play. He liked to defy taboos. I tried to be an outside force of resistance but Toshio would absolutely never listen to what I said. So I'd end up stuck going along with him. I probably thought it was my job to be the break to make sure Toshio wasn't too reckless."

"...Somehow, that does seem like you."

Seishin turned his eyes towards the light of the lamp.

"In the village we have a festival called the mushiokuri. I've followed after that.... ..."

Seishin somehow remembered the night of this year's mushiokuri. He had the feeling it was long ago, and yet that it had just happened.

"The truth is, you musn't do that kind of thing. It was a religious ritual, so to the villagers there are proper religious reasons why you shouldn't. It's in the middle of the night for one thing, so children following along after it is unheard of. But each year, there would always be children who would follow along after. That's what kind of creatures children are."

"That may be."

"I wonder how old we were? Toshio was the one who said we should try following them. I, of course, was against it. Mikiyasu was---any time it might

have been dangerous, he would be caught between Toshio and me, all shook up. ... ... Mikiyasu was easily scared. He was a very scared, timid child. So, for him following after the procession was probably terrifying to him. If we were found by the adults we'd be yelled at. That wasn't all, it's a festival with a kind of scary atmosphere too. I opposed it, and with a relieved face he agreed with me; but, Toshio said 'if that's the case, fine' and said he'd go by himself, and he wanted to go with him so much he couldn't stand it."

"I think I understand," Sunako smiled. Seishin also smiled faintly.

"It was always like that. Mikiyasu in the end gingerly stuck with Toshio. I couldn't help it and tagged along to keep Toshio from making too much of a mess. It's always been like that... ..."

When was it that they stopped playing together? It wasn't just Seishin who, upon entering that pubescent threshold between childhood and adulthood, slipped out of the child only groups and made groups up of those the same age. Somewhere along the line they stopped playing purely stupid pranks and reckless games, and spent more time talking than doing things. Around that time Toshio too found the way to compromise with those older than him, and Seishin remembered borrowing quite a few books and records from the book store's Tashiro and the Murasako rice shop's older brother. And then Seishin didn't see much of Mikiyasu. Mikiyasu himself found other friends---and then became an adult, married, succeeded the family business, and became a father. But, certainly for a time, he and Mikiyasu had joint ownership over a certain time between them.

Seishin held his tongue thinking of Mikiyasu, outside of the village, in a hospital room somewhere. He lost his wife, he lost his child, and he was going to lose himself---.

Say, Sunako's voice suddenly chimed. "If Muroi-san had somebody dear to him, and if you thought that you wanted to let them live, do you know what you should do?"

"Become a doctor?"

"You're wrong," Sunako laughed. "You kill them."

Seishin was flabbergasted.

"To let someone live---if it means to be the master of their time of death, then it means to kill them of your own will. If you don't do it then someone else will kill that person. They will snatch them out of your hands, Muroi-san." Sunako said with a lightly voiced laugh. "Isn't it funny? It is hard having people near to you die. Even though you think it unforgivable, having them snatched out of your life, it's a terrible thing and yet if you want to avoid that, then there's nothing but to kill them yourself. That's what kind of creatures we are."

"Yes.... ... That is true."

Sunako stood from the bench and peered into the darkness of the sanctuary. "... ... Aren't 'precious' and 'piteous' rather alike?"

"Mm?"

Sunako laughed and turned to look back. "For example, suppose you were to keep a baby bird? You would want to hold it often, love it warmly, and it would be very precious to you."

Seishin vaguely nodded.

"But, however dearly you think of it, the little bird will someday die. No matter how much and how much you cherish it and take care of it, it cannot not die. If you don't want it to be taken by somebody else, if you want to have it live as you wish, so much that the only one to kill it ever could be you, then there's no difference in doing it yourself. That is why, yes? If something is precious, it isn't just precious, it's piteous. ...Don't you feel that way?"

"... ... I see."

"That's why if something dies and we think piteously on them, you would say it was precious. You don't want to lose them; losing them is pitiful,

oshii

, I think that is why we say they are dear,

itooshii

. Preciously piteous,

ito oshii."

"....Mm."

Seishin smiled thinly. It was because Sunako was so argumentative, and because it was a reasoning that could be seen as charming from a certain broken vantage point, and also because it was funny that he was being convinced by a little girl of such a young age.

"Is this the kind of thing you always think about?"

At Seishin's question, Sunako looked to Seishin fleetingly, then as if averting her gaze looked up at the stained glass windows.

"I guess so. Living and dying---I often think of these things. I can't not think of them."

Her somewhat pensive tone of voice pricked at Seishin's chest. Sunako bore a grave burden on her health. You could even say that she was always in the ravine between life and death. Flustered with himself for such a foolish question, he suddenly remembered. SLE left one compromised. There were problems with one's immune system. Thus it was easy to catch an infectious disease, her body's ability to resist lacking due to having so many problems all over her body. And now in the village a dangerous plague was spreading out.

"Uhm...." Seishin again tonight was uncertain what to call Sunako, his words muddied. "I think it might be better not to come here too much, don't you?"

Sunako turned to face him. "As I thought, I'm a bother?"

"That isn't what I mean. It's just... there are wild dogs and such."

"Or talk of them. But, I have yet to catch sight of one."

"It's dangerous at night, even out in the country like this."

Sunako stared fiexedly at Seishin, then gave a begrudging nod mixed with a sigh. "I understand. I will behave myself in the house. I will be sure not to invade Muroi-san's territory."

"That isn't what I mean, really."

"You may say it to me frankly. I am used to not having things go my way."

"It isn't that," Seishin hesitated to say. "I'd like you to keep this a secret, but."

Sunako tilted her head.

"It will be fine to tell your parents. I think it is necessary to let your mother know especially. Your family's doctor as well. But, I don't want the people of the village to know. I'd like you not to let it leak outside of your house."

"Could it be that it is such an important secret?"

"That's right. For now, still."

"All right, I will promise."

And so Seishin explained to the girl who nodded with a serious expression.

"In the village right now, an unidentified disease is spreading."

Sunako blinked. "... ... An epidemic?"

"That's the question troubling us. Toshio is thinking that the wild dogs and small animals---and the ticks and fleas attached to them may be the intermediate carriers."

"And that is dangerous?"

"It's dangerous. At least, all of the patients that we have seen to this point have had the worst possible progression and outcome. ---It's ironic, isn't it? You all had come here seeking safer living conditions."

"That's so. I wonder if it isn't more dangerous than being in town. But, these things happen. And, what kind of sickness it is?"

Seishin shook his head. "I don't very well know yet. Toshio is saying that it doesn't conform to any existing epidemic."

"A new strain?"

"I don't know. There's the possibility that it's a new strain or a variation, he's saying, but. Since it becomes dramatically worse, there's no time to analyze it in detail. Unlike people from the city, the people of the village are against pathological autopsies. We also don't have a fully equipped hospital. That's why as far as specifics go, we are completely in the mists."

"I see... ..."

"So, it'd be better not to go out walking carelessly. Particularly with the

possibility that the carrier animals are loitering in this area."

"I understand," Sunako tilted her head lightly to the side looking doubtful. "And I'd finally met Muroi-san, really it is too bad. I wonder if once in a while it would still be all right?"

"I don't know... ... To tell the truth, since we don't know what it is, we don't know how to defend against it. You might not be safe just because you're holed up in the house. I can't say any single thing for certain, though."

"It's like a roulette, isn't it? If my luck is poor, I shall be caught. But, that it would be better to lower my chances of a dangerous encounter is a truth, isn't it."

"That's what I think."

"Thank you. I will tell this to my mother and Ebuchi-san. But, I will say, not to talk about it outside of the house. If a panic breaks out, it will be troublesome. That is how it is, yes?"

Seishin nodded.

"I will take care to be careful, and it will only be once in a while. So, may I come again sometime?"

"It isn't something you need to seek my permission for. But, you really should take care."

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Cultural and Translation Notes

3 - 1

49th day anniversaries

- According to Buddhist faith, after the dead die they meet with 7 different judges, one every 7 days, who determine their next life cycle as they try to reach Nirvana. On the final 49th day, it is said that their next fate is determined, making it particularly important, spiritually. On each 7th day, but particularly the 7th and 49th, family members pray and hope for the deceased to receive the "best" possible judgments.

The September

Equinoctial Week

is also mentioned as coming up, so I'll refer you back to the notes in

Chapter 1.3-1

Higan or other shore was said in Buddhist lore to be set in the far west. At the Vernal (spring) and Autumn Equinox, the sun sets due west, and at these times they were said to be able to cross over from the other shore, and festivities or rituals are held throughout the week, honoring the dead's burial plots and family Buddhist family altars, leaving food and drink offerings to the dead and reading Buddhist sutras at grave sites. As these celebrations are a week long each time, they have those equinoxes at the center of the assigned weeks; March 21st and September 23rd.

3 - 5

Kawaii/Kawaisou, Oshii/Itooshii

When Sunako talks about precious and piteous, the words she uses in Japanese are

kawaii

可愛い for cute and

kawaisou

可哀想 for pitiable, often used or said when saying "the poor thing" or expressing sympathy. The word

kawaii

is made up of the kanji for acceptable and love; the word

kawaisou

is made up of the same acceptable, pity, and thought. This translated imperfectly but passably in English.

She also supposes the word

itooshi

愛おしい used to refer to someone beloved, usually in a romantic sense, may be made up of the word 'love' 愛 (read as either (

w)ai

in

kawaii or *ito* in *itooshii*

) from cute/precious and

oshii

惜しい, for pity, lack or regret. There was no way I could think of to translate this without noting the Japanese roots.

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1

It was the morning of September 10th, when the morning examinations had begun and he was just thinking of taking a break that Toshio received the call from the National Hospital in the town of Mizobe.

"Doctor, the phone. It is from the National Hospital's Dr. Taniguchi."

Ritsuko turned the phone over to Toshio who excused himself from his patient to return to the waiting room. There, he took the call.

Taniguchi from the national hospital was an older physician than Toshio. His upperclassman by seven years from the same university, of course they knew each other from the university itself but being the connection between a senior and a junior afforded him certain accommodations. That said, Taniguchi himself wasn't born in Mizobe, nor did he live in the vicinity of Mizobe. Taniguchi came to the national hospital twice a week as a side job to lecturing at the university. He came from the city on an express train for two days a week, then went back.

The national hospital was a hospital large enough to rival the mutual aide hospital of the JA but the truth was that size was all there was to it. The doctors employed there full time were young with no career. They came rushing in from their bases to make a career there in order to then return to their home towns and serve as private physicians. Those who didn't were old fogeys who lost their place to call home to go back to. There were doctors with experience who, while having established suitable social standing in the city, would come in so many times a week for consultation.

"I've switched lines." Toshio took the receiver.

"Ah, Toshio-kun. This is about the patient you had turned over to us the other day, yes?"

Because of the relations between juniors and their upperclassmen, Toshio often relied on Taniguchi in order to turn over obstreperous treatment cases---

that is, patients who would require hospitalization for any long period--to the national hospital. If they required surgery, they went there, if they required brain surgery, they'd be there, there were plenty of routes. Toshio himself didn't turn much of a profit from this but in exchange he received information. There was also the benefit of being able to ask about their progression easily.

"Do you mean Yasumori Mikiyasu?"

"Mm, yes. About him, this morning he died of renal failure at 5:16 AM."

Is that so, Toshio murmured. When overseeing him as he was taken away by ambulance, Toshio had resolved within himself that that may have been the last time he saw his childhood friend.

"What was the progression like?"

"When he was carried in, he had quite severe anemia, as you know. I wasn't present so I don't know, but. His creatinine levels were high so we were vigilant regarding renal failure but MODS developed into DIC, resulting in MOF. Do you need detailed progression notes?"

"It may put you through great pains, but by all means, please. Quickly, if you could."

"A thorough student aren't you, as always."

Toshio smiled bitterly. "Mikiyasu is a childhood friend. ---It is a small village."

Ah, said Taniguchi, his voice awkward. "That's, I'm very sorry to hear that. It was a bit of a strange progression, wasn't it? At least from looking at his medical records, I wouldn't think he'd had such severe renal impairment, but. If only I could have seen him when he first came in, but it wasn't my consultation day."

"It is a shame. ---Was it aplastic anemia, or was there a white blood cell disorder?"

"There wasn't, actually."

"None? You are sure?"

"Mm. You said as much. For the record, we ran thorough tests here ourselves, though. It seems it was not aplastic anemia. There was nothing unusual with his bone marrow. He had high neutrophil counts but his white blood cell count and

hematopoietic figures weren't abnormal."

"Is that so," Toshio answered while thinking 'I knew it.'

"Will a fax do?"

"It will do nicely."

Toshio conveyed his gratitude to Taniguchi and hung up the phone.

(Toshio-san)

Mikiyasu's voice lingering in his ears sounded naive---he guiltily strove to forget that voice that had been relying on him. There was no use in holding it in his heart forever. This wasn't so special of a tragedy, not compared to what it meant for the village as a whole.

Before notice of Mikiyasu's death came in, he had just received notification from Ishida that a man in Shimo-Sotoba had died. yesterday Seishin had reported that an old woman in Naka-Sotoba died. The day before yesterday Ishida, again, conveyed that an office worker living in Mizuguchi died. At this rate, the situation was quickly becoming more urgent.

(It's contagious.)

There was no proof but he was already certain. The first infected person became the contagion and a secondary infection occurred. Those patients who were the victims of the secondary infection were many. And from those secondary infection patients as a source of contamination came third wave infections. ---This indicated how the situation, the infection was expanding.

(The time span is short...)

Regardless of the fact that it appeared the incubation period was a week to two weeks, the time span in which the infection was expanding was far too short for that. As expected, maybe it wasn't something that spread from person to person. With fleas and ticks as the carriers, it could have broken out in a day or two. But, living in the mountains, it would be difficult to find less air tight houses than most of those in the village. How on earth were they to exterminate the carrier animals?

Toshio felt something akin to a faint chill. Just maybe, this could have been a

calamity beyond what Toshio had first imagined as a "worst case scenario."

"Mikiyasu-san died, you say?" At Ritsuko's words, Yasuyo's eyes widened.

"Yes. Just now there was a call from the National Hospital."

Really, said Yasuyo, her hands washing her teacup coming to a stop as she gazed into the kitchen sink.

The kitchen was a remnant of the times when they took in-patients. They used to prepare meals here for in-patients, and in the dinning room near by staff could also eat. That dinning room was now the break room. In one enclosure was a break room, a washroom for kitchen staff that they no longer had, but its sofa had become a space for napping.

From that point on the kitchen may have gone unused but even now it was maintained as if it were used, and Ritsuko at times used it to heat up lunch or even to do light cooking. There was a separate kitchenette for preparing tea but when taking breaks it was more convenient to use the kitchen. And the kitchenette was narrow, so when it came time to clean up afterwards it was more common for everyone to make use of the kitchen at once.

Yasuyo was caught in her thoughts, her hands stopping, but her face suddenly lifted as if her breath were cut short, wiping at her hands.

"RIcchan, sorry, but I'll leave this to you. I'm going to talk to the doctor."

"Yasuyo-san."

"It'll just be a bit, as expected we can't not ask the doctor about the status of thing. It looks like the part timers are uneasy about it too, and all."

Her intent stated, Yasuyo stepped out of the kitchen. It wasn't long after that she returned.

"Ricchan, do you have plans this afternoon?"

"No."

"Then, when work is finished, could you stay behind, I wonder? We're holding a little meeting. For lunch it sounds like the doctor will prepare lunches for it."

Yes ma'am, Ritsuko answered while thinking 'at last.' Toshio would have an explanation. She had a feeling she wanted to hear it and didn't want to hear it. If she heard it, it would be confirmed, she felt. Ritsuko and the others imagining something and Toshio as a doctor declaring it were different matters entirely.

Nervously finishing the cleaning, she returned to work. Each other staff member she saw seemed to have the same nervousness but nobody said a word. Caught up in the strange flowing feel of tension, even as noon came the flow of patients didn't stop. Lately, it had become customary for their lunch hour to be pushed back. There were many patients. It didn't seem like there were many who seemed especially sick. They had the impression that patients were coming in with symptoms that they wouldn't usually come into the hospital over. Those patients in particular would talk with Toshio for a long time, dragging out medical examination hours.

(We're in suspense...)

That's what Ritsuko thought. The patients--the villagers were, whether conscious of the increasing number of deaths or not, vaguely awayer that something was strange, that their health and very lives could suffer unusually easily. That was likely a disease spreading throughout the villagers. And that was surely from now on going to compound beyond the level it was at even now.

Taking lunch in shifts, Ritsuko handled the patients. The last patient's examination ended past two o'clock. Finishing up cleaning afterwards, she went towards the break room, where all staff members were already assembled.

"Ricchan's the last?" Toshio smiled before a stack of documents piled on the table. "Close the door and have a seat."

His tone was the same as always. Taking some relief in that, Ritsuko closed the door and sat in the empty seat. In the break room was the cool air of the air conditioner, and in that air the more chilling draft of their nervousness.

"You might already know this but today the contractor's Mikiyasu died," Toshio began his talk, looking towards Mutou and Towada. "This might be a hard conversation for Mutou-san and you to follow but if there's anything unclear, just ask. And be patient."

Mutou and Towada nodded.

"With Mikiyasu dead, that makes the death toll since August nineteen people."

That hit like a bomb. Ritsuko's back muscled tensed. The voices saying 'that many' were multiple, and Ritsuko may have unconsciously gave voice to such herself.

"There have been that many, actually. Amongst them are ones who didn't have anything to do with us, who collapsed in Mizobe and were taken to the hospital there, or who were taken off to there. Anyways, the government office has been sending in death certificates, and counting them up, Mikiyasu is the nineteenth. --It's an abnormal situation."

Ritsuko lightly swallowed her breath.

"And Mikiyasu was, following Nao-san and Susumu-kun, the third death at the contractors. It's possible everyone here's been faintly aware of it but there's the possibility that it's an epidemic."

"Doctor, are you sure?" Mutou leaned forward.

"I'm sure people are dead. And it's clear there're excessive deaths, and an increasing trend at that. I think that we can be pretty certain in thinking that it's an epidemic."

Saying that, Toshio roughly explained how things had progressed. Concretely, he gave the names of the dead and their causes of death.

"By the way, the result of the blood tests on the contractor's Nao-san and Mikiyasu were both negative for any epidemics. Based on the test results, the two of them were indeed not infected with any known epidemic. I requested a culture test too but I don't have all of those results yet. Culture tests take time. I think that it'll be a little longer until the cultures come back but if nothing else based on what we know at this time, the two of them weren't carrying any germs that would cause them to suddenly lose their lives. Murasako Mieko-san was the same. The results that came back from the police were completely clean."

Uhm, Towada spoke up. "Even though the results haven't come in, can you declare that it isn't an epidemic? I thought that the doctor had just said that it was an epidemic, but."

"Mm, it comes down to this. ---The cause of an epidemic is a pathogenic microbe. When those microbes ravage a body, it's called an infection. All of them are indeed

contagious

, epi for spread demic for among the people, but among those infections, the one that inflict grave damages to the human body, the ones that have such an effect that society can't afford to disregard them are called epidemics. Amongst all types of infections are ones we're especially vigilant against called epidemics. ---Are you following this so far?"

"Ah.... yes."

"So an epidemic is strictly those infections that have been labeled "epidemics." Right now, the thing that's spreading through the village doesn't correspond to any of those predefined epidemics. Based on the symptoms as well as the test results, it's cleared from being any of them. So it's not an epidemic but based on the observations of the increasing numbers of patients, it's clearly contagious. And the results are grave, and the number of patients is high. It's not an existing epidemic but it's clearly an infection disastrous to society. As far as its ability to influence people and society, I think it'd be appropriate to call it an epidemic."

"Ah, I understand."

Toshio nodded,

"It's not an existing epidemic, and the possibility, however small, that it's not an infection, still remains. It's possible to think that it's some kind of poison or an allergic reaction to something. Anyway, it'd be accurate to say we still don't know what's happening. We don't know the cause of the disease, or how it spreads."

Yasuyo raised her hand.

"Is there the possibility that it's a new type of epidemic?"

"The possibility that it's a new kind, of course, exists."

"What will we do about this from now on?" Mutou said, sounding lost.

"If only we know, huh? At any rate, until we know the cause of the chain of

deaths, our hands and feet are tied. Not only can't we treat or prevent it, we can't ask the administration for assistance."

"There's no way to have the administration investigate it?"

"I plan to do that. That said, I have to put together the data and the related materials. I've got to do that and make sure to have the administration see the need to investigate it. All of this, the Health Department's Ishida-san is currently investigating." Toshio said, with a bitter smile. "If it's an existing epidemic or a rogue strain, it'll be fast work. We haven't gotten any results of that nature yet, so we have to get together the materials with more explanatory power. Regardless of everything, we don't have any solid proof that it's contagious. It'd be best to think of this as something that's going to take time."

"The administration is slow to do anything at times like this, aren't they? If you don't pester them with quite a bit of proof, then...." Mutou breathed a deep sigh. Everyone present sighed as well with agreement.

"What we know right now is that it seems to start with anemia. At least, Shimizu Megumi-chan, the Yasumori's Nao-san, and Mikiyasu, that's three people, didn't have anything you could point to as wrong with them besides anemia. Anemeia occurs, so their complexion is poor, they feel washed out and have no appetite. The people around them think the summer heat is getting to them, or that it's a cold, and it's easy to overlook."

"What is the cause of the anemia?" Kiyomi asked, causing Toshio to shake his head.

"That I don't know. Looking at the test results, it's normocytic normochromic anemia. At least we know it isn't iron deficiency anemia or pernicious anemia. It doesn't seem like it's a blood formation disorder. The National Hospital tested Mikiyasu but they said to me that he probably didn't have aplastic anemia or leukemia. Looking at the rest results, you would think it was anemia coming from external bleeding or hemolysis but there're no signs of internal bleeding that could be the cause of the anemia."

Shimoyama nodded. "We used a CT to search here and there for that. ---That's right, there is no internal bleeding. At least, there wasn't for Yasumori-san's wife."

Toshio nodded.

"In cases where it's a small continuous bleed, X-rays or ultrasonic rays may miss the bleeding spot but, in this case, I don't think that's it. If nothing else, since it suddenly gets so much worse and all. Thinking of the situation up until now, it call comes to an end within a few days. The progression is about that fast."

"Then, what about hemolysis?" Yasuyo asked.

"Going by the process of elimination, the only thing left is hemolysis, but. In cases of hemolysis, bilirubin and LDH levels should be higher. Yet in the initial stages, that doesn't show up. Coombs tests come up negative too, so if nothing else it's certain not to be hemolysis from an autoimmune disease."

"So there's no hemolysis that doesn't raise that---whatever it was called?" Mutou said.

"It's not that there isn't. There's intravascular hemolysis and extravascular hemolysis but in the case of intervascular hemolysis, serum bilirubin levels and LHD levels don't raise. In those cases, hemoglobin would be in the blood plasma or there would be hemoglobinuria but that wasn't the case in Nao-san or Mikiyasu. On the other hand, in the case of extravascular hemolysis, it's common for biliruin and LDH levels to rise but it seems that isn't certain to hapen."

Mutou groaned, sounding terribly confused.

"Anyway, I think that the odds of hemolysis are high. And not something congenital, it's acquired. It's not something that effects immunity, but that raises the sensitivity of the complement system, or possibly something that causes red blood cells to be crushed, or it may be some drug or poison."

"Poison, you say?" Yasuyo said, Toshio nodding.

"Spider or snake venom, or even bee venom can cause hemolysis it seems. If it's a snake or a bee, the patient or their families would probably remember being bitten or stabbed but there's the possibility it was a spider or another insect of some sort whose poison is causing the hemolysis. --Then there's drugs. Sulfa drugs or salicytic acid, or lead or arsenic could also cause hemolysis. In that case, the soil, the water, or possibly the food could be contaminated but based

on the patients' behavior, this is a very low possibility, I think."

"What about existing epidemics?"

"It's modeled like malaria but it's probably not malaria. There's no high fever characteristic of malaria. We could think of it as a rogue strain of it but I'd think that tests for malaria would pick up on a rogue strain of it, too."

"The patients who die are mostly doing so in the middle of the night, aren't they. The notifications come in first thing in the morning, don't they?" Kiyomi said. "It isn't PNH?"

"I think we could suspect that too."

PNH, Mutou mumbled, to which Yasuyo answered.

"Paroxysmal Nocturnal Hemoglobinuria, possibly. But, it's written in the books that PNH progresses slowly. Could it be a more vicious type of that, I wonder?"

Kiyomi nodded. "With PNH, pancytopenia occurs. That said, Nao-san had lowered coutns of all blood cell types didn't she? Because of that, she became more prone to infection, and with a tendency to hemorrhage, a blood clot could form. Nao-san had heart failure, didn't she? A pulmonary edema came from that."

"I wonder if it was heart failure from a blood clot?"

"That is a possibility, isn't it? Also, it was written in the books that it could lead to death by renal failure too, but. Gotouda Fuki-san was renal failure, wasn't she!"

Toshio smiled wryly. "You've really done your homework. I'm in awe."

Yasuyo and Kiyomi's voices raised in a laugh. They both pointed their fingers at each other, saying they didn't feel like doing it but the other kept pushing it, blaming it on each other. Toshio laughed too,

"The contractor's Mikiyasu died of renal failure too. When I first had him taken away to the hospital, his BUN levels were elevated. His creatinine levels were within normal ranges so at first the doctors thought that he was dehydrated due to the heat but later he had bloody urine and obvious signs of renal failure. The doctors tried to treat that but in the end renal failure lead to DIC occuring and

things suddenly turned for the worst and he died."

What is DIC Towada asked Satoko. As Satoko seemed uninterested in answering, Kiyomi answered.

"Disseminated intravascular coagulation syndrome. In short, abnormalities in how the blood coagulates."

"Our nurses are efficient," Toshio laughed. "But, while the rest results show the cause of death was uremia, it wasn't just his kidneys, his lungs and liver were malfunctioning too. At first it was respiratory failure that was occurring. At the end he contracted pneumonia, and his liver functioning fell drastically. He died of uremia so on the surface it looks like just renal failure but if he died because he couldn't breathe, it would have probably said lung failure."

"Multiple organ failure---MOF, then. Or these days, they call it, what, MODS?"

Kiyomi asked, to which Yasuyo nodded.

"At any rate, it looks like the whole body just starts falling apart. The first characteristic symptom is anemia, then it worsens steadily into MOF. The problem becomes how to defer it." Yasuyo spoke, looking to Toshio. "If we don't do something within three days, it becomes unmanageable doesn't it? Without the time to investigate what's happening, there's no time to search for a treatment. ....This is very serious, this matter."

"What's the route of infection?" Kiyomi asked, to which Toshio shook his head.

"We don't really know. I had Seishin look into the connections between the patients but no matter how you think about it, there are patients without any direct contact."

"It's hard to think of it as a direct infection, in other words. At Shimizu-san's place, the only one to be hit was Megumi-chan, and all. At the Maruyasu Sawmill, it was just Giichi-san, wasn't it? At Maruyasu, Giichi-san was bed ridden, with the family even tending to his bedpans, so it would seem like it would transfer directly to the family, and yet."

"That goes for us too, doesn't it?" said Yasuyo, teasingly. "We've gone out as nurses amongst them after all. Like this, we're lined up at the goose's neck for the patients, so it can't be a direct infection can it? It's likely not a droplet

infection either. Though it seems like it would spread by blood. We might use gloves, but I can't imagine the family would."

"If that were the case, the Maruyasu family would obviously be hit a lot harder, wouldn't it! Since that's not the case, doesn't that mean that it doesn't spread through the blood?"

"Then, an intermediate carrier animal? Why, that really will be a hassle!"

"If it's an intermediary animal, wouldn't there be more of a concentration of where the victims are? It feels like they've come from all over the village, doesn't it? Could it be a matter of the ratio of outbreaks? Even if you're infected, the rate of outbreak could be low, don't you suppose? Whether it spreads to the family or doesn't spread to the family;could it be a matter of constitution?"

"That's true..."

"Family it spreads to and family it doesn't, huh..." Toshio said to himself. "Well, even if we talk about it here, nothing's going to happen. Anyway, we need to gather more medical cases, for now."
"That we do."
"Right now I'm suspecting carrier animals. That seems to be the highest likelihood. It's just, looking at the most recent patients, patients coming from the same concentrated families are rare. The Gotouda-san's place and the contractor's cases are the exceptions. It seems like the infection rate, or possibly the outbreak rate isn't too high, you could probably say. That said, don't get too comfortable. Anyway, be sure to wash your hands, wear gloves, and be thorough with things like that."
"And to also be careful with handling medical waste, too." Kiyomi said, to which

Toshio nodded.

"I think everyone else is worried too but if we take care I think there's the chance we can protect against it. We have to protect ourselves too, and to make sure we don't become a source of contamination, I'd like everyone to take care."
At Toshio's words, everyone nodded.
"And also, don't spread this out. We don't know a single thing for sure yet, after all. There's no point in inciting a useless panic. Ishida-san and me are taking the

necessary measures to keep it quiet."
To this, too, everyone nodded.

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Yasumori Junko didn't know what kind of expression she should wear. Mikiyasu's funeral was to start momentarily. Tokijirou and Setsuko stood before the altar looking as if to waste away, their faces bowed down deeply. It was heart-wrenching, the way they clung to each other's hands as if they had nobody but each other to rely upon.

Junko's husband Kazuya was weighted with the grief of the loss of a relative he got along with so well. No, it was as if he were in a daze. Junko herself was in a similar daze, and of course was also sad. But, this was the third funeral for the contractors. The first was Nao's death, then from there was Susumu and then Mikiyasu went. When Nao died, Junko's whose voice rang out as she cried, was, on the third occasion that was today, more bewildered beyond her means than she was strictly sad.

Her father-in-law Kazunari was the same. From the antechamber he gazed at Tokujirou and Setsuko, his head tilting with a cool and distant expression.

"What's happening, these days."

I know, sighed her mother-in-law Atsuko.

"Three of them all in a row. I no longer know what to even say."

"You said it. But, don'tcha think there's something strange about this?"

Something, Atsuko blinked. Kazunari's face was all the more cold. "Don't you think it's too many in a row? Not just at my uncle's place. My old man, Yamairi, too. You don't think there could be some kind of bad disease going around, or something, huh?"

Junko's back stiffened as if worried about what others around would think at hearing Kazunari's low voice. Stop that, said Atsuko in an even lower voice. "Don't voice such terrible things like that!"

"But you know, before the Junior Monk came, asking a lot of questions about my old man. If he had get well visitors or not. That was probably what the Junior Monk had on his mind too, don't you think?"

"Please, stop it, I said. Please don't forget that we're at a funeral."

"I ain't forgot. Isn't that why I'm saying it? Adding in my old man's this is our fourth one. With this, that's four new graves built in the cemetery."

"Father-in-law didn't have some strange disease. If it was a disease that could spread to others, we who were taking care of him would have caught it long ago." Right, said Atsuko looking to her for agreement, though Junko only nodded, still dazed.

"The old man's case is different from the three of them."

"It was different. He had been ill for a long time after all. But, to others, they might not understand how different it was. If they start talking about some strange epidemic, they'll make it all Father-in-law's fault. That's why you shouldn't carelessly talk about such things."

But, groaned Kazunaru, trying to continue.

Junko compared him with Tokujirou on the other end of the altar. Yes, Giichi's condition was already poor, and it wasn't a disease which could spread to others. But, was there any way to explain the succession of misfortunes that they were experiencing?

Mysteriously, Junko remembered the night when Bon began, with the now deceased Nao at the lumberyard. Specifically, she remembered the feeling when they had met Kirishiki Seishirou. She didn't know why. The feeling she had done something she couldn't take back that chilled her spine. She had that same feeling. ---Yes, that something that couldn't be taken back was starting, that feeling.

At lunch time Kaori casually looked to the calendar and realized again that today was September 11th. September 11th, Sunday. The character for 11. Two ones. It was on August 11th that Megumi was missing. Since then, one month had passed.

She felt like something was tightening in her chest. Over summer break, it had

been an incessant feeling. As they entered into September and a new school term started, she had finally been starting to forget that and yet at the slightest opportunity like this it was resurrected.

Feeling like something was lodged in her throat, Kaori swallowed what was in her mouth and set her chopsticks down. Her food wasn't going past her throat. ---Or rather, when she remembered Megumi, everything from eating to going to school to helping in the kitchen, such every day things all made her cowed. It was like, for example, being at a morning assembly at school and laughing when you weren't supposed to. It felt like she was doing something terribly imprudent. She felt a touch guilty.

Seeing that Kaori had put down her chopsticks, her mother Sachiko made a stern face. "Kaori, now, eat all of your lunch!"

When pressed she nodded but she felt like small bones were caught in her throat. It was always like this. Even if she was casually watching TV, she wondered if it was all right for her to be doing this. Even going to her club or taking classes, she couldn't run away from the thought that she was doing this even though Megumi was dead. Enjoying TV or a book or talking with her friends, raising her voice in laughter, realizing that she was enjoying herself, that she was forgetting that Megumi was dead, the absurd feeling that she was an unjust human being sprung up from nowhere.

Akira, who was scarfing down his lunch, gave Kaori a fleeting glance and said "cheer up."

"Mm...."

Sachiko, too, gave a light sigh. "It's just as Akira says. I understand that it was a shock but get over it and cheer up already."

That's right, Kaori murmured. But she couldn't forget. On the 11th, Megumi was missing. On the night of the 12th she was found. On the 13th, she paid a get well visit. That was the last time she saw Megumi. On the 14th, Kaori didn't know anything. She didn't even dream that Megumi was bad enough to die, and another trite summer day passed her by. Then was the 15th. Suddenly that phone call came.

"Even Megumi-chan would be sad if she saw you looking like that. You have to

work hard for Megumi-chan's share, too."

Kaori cast her eyes downward. How many times had Sachiko said that to her now. Kaori's sadness was Megumi's sadness. In that case she couldn't relax and rest in peace to move on. Megumi's death was such a shame that from now on Kaori would have to live for Megumi as well. She said that the various joys Megumi couldn't have, Kaori would have to obtain in her place.

Is that right, she thought. Is that really what Megumi wanted or not? It sounded like an incredibly self serving excuse. There was no doubt that if it were Megumi she'd rather be happy herself than see Kaori happy. Even though she was dead, if she didn't even have a friend mourning her, that would be how many times more miserable for her? Sachiko's words sounded more like being told to clear away her mess. It was like being told not to hold on to her affection for the dead, to clean that up and throw it away. Kaori thought that that would be like betraying Megumi. The more Sachiko said that the more she thought that at least she wouldn't forget about Megumi, that she wouldn't 'clear it away', so she had to think to herself.

Lightly gripping her hand and raising her face, across the table her father was looking worriedly at her. Kaori smiled a bit and took up her chopsticks. It wasn't that she had no appetite but she was still resistant to continuing to eat. She had a feeling it was a part of 'clearing it away'.

"Speaking of that," Akira murmured to no one in particular. "Yesterday, somewhere in Shimo-Sotoba, it looks like someone died again. Mourning lanterns were out."

Sachiko's brows furrowed. "Oh dear, no. ...

Again?"

Akira gave a strangely serious nod. His father looked at that expression of Akira's, and then as if tasting something bitter, turned his eyes away.

"Something strange's going on, huh? There's Megumi, then after that the lumber mill's Yasuyuki-nii-chan. Before that too, there were the three dead in Yamairi, weren't there? Why're this many people all dying?"

"This kind of thing happens," Sachiko said, her tone blunt. "Death is something

that comes in succession. Even so, I wish it'd give it a rest already. If it goes on like this, it's like a bad omen."

"That's the problem, huh? It's like, I got this feeling something bad's happening."

"Don't say such stupid things," Sachiko said with an overdone grimace. "The people in Yamairi were getting on in years. Yasuyuki-san and Megumi-chan died of illness didn't they? It isn't as if they were killed or something."

Turning his eyes to Akira as he said "Yeah, but," Tanaka swallowed what was in his mouth. He knew that it was Nakano Wataru. Nakano who lived in Shimo-Sotoba died. Yesterday, his death certificate came in and Tanaka turned over a copy of it to Ishida. Since this summer, the number of copies he had handed over like so came to nineteen. And now the pace was getting faster. It didn't take an expert to see that the situation was accelerating.

Even at the government office there were voices saying something was strange. The Ozaki Clinic's Toshio and Ishida were in contact frequently, do you think it's because of that? they whispered. Nobody would say it too loudly, fearing the gaze of the bureau chief. The head of the branch office wasn't from Sotoba. Appointed by the town hall, he transferred to the village. Ishida seemed to ignore the chief and worked with Toshio, something all members of the staff realized, while keeping their mouths shit. Sotoba had a system that kept things moving smoothly. The chief, who was an outsider to the village, had no place in the three pillar system of the village. Complete outsider though he was, the bureau chief had to save face as the bureau chief. Everybody knew full well that if they passed things through the chief, it would actually mean that things would no longer be able to progress smoothly.

And so things carried on its same manner as when it was a village. While it had been annexed into Mizobe, the village was still its own distinct entity, and had a tendency to refuse interference from the town. The town accepted that, and had a trend of lassez-faire. No matter what happened, it wouldn't be run by the bureau chief, and consequently it wouldn't be run by the town itself, and the chief was to be left out of affairs; treated as an outsider; such was the unspoken agreement within the government office. Doing it this way, it went through Kanemasa who put it through to the town, which was how it would come around

to the bureau chief. Only after that did the bureau chief's involvement even begin.

That said, nineteen death certificates was too much for Tanaka's heart to bear alone. Especially when things were like this, when he was seeing his own wife make light of the situation, the sense of an impending crisis swelled. Akira was the one who was correct. Sotoba was strange. He felt an impatient irritation with himself for not being able to say it.

Taking a deep breath and raising his face, his gaze met with Kaori's. As if ahamed, Kaori cast her head down. She might have thought that he, Tanaka, was condemning her for being depressed. However clearly reluctant and unwilling it seemed, she began using her chopsticks.

He didn't think there was any need to force herself. It was sad for Kaori to have lost her friend. The feelings of sadness were something that naturally boiled up inside of her, so it wasn't as if she could just repress it through sheer will power, could she? If those around her told her not to grieve, Kaori would just be hiding it. He had the feeling that ordering her to cheer up like Sachiko was harmful, without benefit. But it was better that she ate. There was nothing more important than keeping up her physical strength. ----Tanaka thought as much, without daring to add it to the conversation.

Motoko left the house as always, and in the distance saw a funeral procession. The coffin rose on top of the palanquin, a great crowd carrying it towards Sue no Yama.

For some reason or other she gripped her thumb in her fist. Both of Motoko's parents were already dead, so there was no need to do that and yet whenever she saw a funeral procession or a hearse, she couldn't help doing it. Now that thumb may have been a symbol for her children, for her husband and her in-laws---for that kind of family.

Going to the highway, bearing the usual feeling of unease she headed towards Chigusa. Entering the store, she could see several people in mourning clothes. Mourners who weren't attending the burial services must have drifted here. Motoko felt a faint tightness in her chest. She was certain that when they entered the shop, they didn't spread salt or any such, did they? She couldn't help

the feeling that they'd picked up something at the funeral that they had brought with them into the shop.

As if to cheer up Motoko from such a state, Kanami smiled and waved lightly from the counter. Motoko nodded and went behind the counter, preparing to do her job and then blinking in surprise. In the corner of their work space, positioned where the customer's prying eyes couldn't see, there was a paper napkin spread out and piled with salt. Kanami does this kind of thing too, Motoko thought.

As Motoko looked to her wide eyed, Kanami noted the line of sight of the customers and gave an embarrassed seeming shrug.

"It's something at least. It's a matter of comfort."

"Isn't it?" Motoko smiled.

"I get the feeling they're coming in succession. I've gotten a little superstitious over it."

Come to think of it, she had heard that someone that Kanami's mom got along well with had died. There was the misfortune in Yamairi, and a regular customer's daughter had died. Her husband was the father's coworker, so they had gone to give condolences. Even given it was a summer hotter than average, that it was continuing on this long could certainly endear a person to a superstition or two.

".....I'm sure it's over now," Motoko said in a small voice. "The summer heat seemed like there was no end to it in sight but it has gotten cooler in the mornings and the evenings."

That's right, Kanami smiled.

"A funeral? Nakano's son? ---Well, my."

The elderly gathered around Takemura's store front just as they had for years on end. Hearing Ohtsuka Yaeko's announcement, Hirosawa Takeko let out a hysteric shriek.

"Even though it was the old man who was a drunkard falling down so many times..."

"That's just it! When I heard there was a funeral for Nakano, I thought the old man had finally drank himself under too, you know!"

Takeko nodded. "His liver was failing, and it even seemed like he had one leg in the coffin already, didn't it. And yet instead he's living a long life being a bother to everyone around him!"

No doubt about that, laughed the elderly whom Tatsu watched coldly. Honestly, what happy go lucky lot. Is this what this bunch thought of all these funerals were happening in a row here? As Tatsu grumbled in her mind, a black hired car drove before her eyes. Because it was such a fine car, she dared say it couldn't be Nakano's. Just before, a fine foreign car had passed by on the road towards the temple, she had heard. It was said that the contractor's funerals were at the temple. It likely belonged to a condolence caller attending that.

As she thought that, walking out in the still summer like rays of the sun, Ikumi Itou appeared. Ikumi watched the passing hired car and gave a pretentious grimace.

"Another funeral, I wonder?"

"They say it's Nakano's funeral."

"Nakano?"

Ohtsuka Yaeko nodded. "Right. The house on the outskirts of Shimo-Sotoba. The son there died. Even though he was in the prime of life."

Ikumi snorted a thin laugh. "This summer's been nothing but funerals. That's why I said nothing good would come of it."

"Oh you, don't you say that every year?" Satou Oitarou flashed his tabacco stained yellowing teeth in a smile. However stained it indeed was, his front tooth was his own. Oitarou bragged about that.

"That's a lie, that is. It isn't like I say it every year! This year is special. Why, all these funerals!"

"It can't be helped. It's nothing but old folks here," Takeko said, Yaeko laughing, too. Ikumi gave them a glare with chilling eyes.

"How nice you can laugh. Takeko-san's household just had a funeral, didn't

they?"

"That wasn't us. That was the Sawmill. The Ohtsuka sawmill is indeed related to me, so I did go, though. Even though they are relatives, I've cut ties." Yaeko waved her hand. Takeko and Oitarou nodded seemingly knowledgable.

"They got up into some weird new religion, then had the nerve to come to us trying to convert us, putting us at our wits' end! When it came to the temple, they said they had nothing left to gain from them, so when their own grandson died, they weren't taken care of."

Oitarou nodded solemnly. "It's a punishment for the lack of respect shown to the temple. That's what I think of it, myself."

You've said it, Yaeko laughed.

Ikumi snorted. "Faith has to be faith in a proper God or it doesn't mean anything after all. Though, I worship at the temple and don't think I've profited for it. Well, even while the Sawmill's good for nothing, I'm sure they were tricked into it."

Yes, yes, Takeko said, interrupting Ikumi. If she let her go on like this, it was obvious she would have said something suspicious. "Well, it is true there are a lot of funerals. If it continues like this, I'm afraid next it might be my turn!"

"If it's you, you'll be fine. You're getting on fine somehow or another, aren't you?"

"I am, but still," said Takeko with a laugh, though Ikumi's gaze was fixed in place.

"It's been since Kanemasa moved in."

Tatsu opened her eyes.

"What is she even trying to say, this person, here. Kanemasa moved in after the misfortune in Yamairi!"

"But, since the house had been built. That place isn't good! She shouldn't have built there. And it doesn't have anything to do with Yamairi. That was a problem with the Murasako family, I told you. Gigorou-san simply got caught up in the Murasako's bad fortune. The funerals that have been continuing since after that,

aren't they from after when Kanemasa moved in? A high school student in Shimo-Sotoba, died."

"Ah, Shimizu's Tokurou-san's place's grand daughter."

"Since then haven't they been on a roll? These funerals, and for some reason we're seeing ambulances coming and going! It's Kanemasa! Kanemasa. There's definitely something to them. That bunch summons in evil."

Tatsu sighed and shook her head. She'd gotten herself started again, she feared.

But it was a fact that there were many funerals. More than Ikumi thought, more than all of the old people gathered here thought; Tatsu had such a feeling.

(Something's happening.....?)

It might be, said a feeling stagnating in her chest. Something was off about this summer. ---No, lately, Sotoba was strange. She had the intuition that at least that much was certain.

Natsuno called out simply that he was going to Mutou's and left. There was a math problem he just couldn't solve. Mutou's older brother---and his younger sister Aoi for that matter---weren't terribly reliable as teachers but Tamotsu was a collector of crib notes. It was possible he kept some from when he was a first year, he realized. Their high schools were separate but fortunately the text book they used was the same.

The summer heat was still fierce. Fed up with it he looked up to the blue sky when the not-too-far off sound of bells were heard. Looking off the side of the road, a coffin draped in a white cloth was being carried out of a house by the roadside.

Again, thought Natsuno has he stopped. He didn't know which house that one was. It's pretty close, was all Natsuno had known. Yamairi, Megumi, and after that his parents had been involved in about two more Mourning Group tasks. Didn't that make for the fifth one? And in about one month.

Was it like this last year too, he thought. Natsuno moved in to Sotoba last year, though he didn't remember seeing any funerals then. Even though he'd seen zero since this summer, suddenly since August started, he'd seen a

procession of funerals. If it was the fifth one in one month, that'd average out to more than one house per week having one. No matter how you thought about it, this was too many, but.

Cocking his head in puzzlement, he went to Mutou's. Going up to Tamotsu's room, he informed him there was a funeral, but it didn't seem to catch Tamotsu's attentions.

"Man, there's been a lot of funerals, huh?" Natsuno said, to which Tamotsu answered with a nonchalant "Have there?" while searching inside a cardboard box.

"Ain't that how it goes? Someone died, someone's about to die, you're always hearing something like that. ---Ah, found it. I've got some pretty good treasures myself, don't I? Be grateful."

As Tamotsu presented him with his crib notes, Natsuno gave him a sigh. "I'd be more grateful if instead of giving it to me like this you'd explain it to me, though."

"Depending on others's no good," Tamotsu laughed. "If you're planning on going to college, you'd be better off going to cram school."

"Like a college entrance cram school out in the country like this's be worth it. I'd be better off with correspondence courses."

"You're so un-cute." Tamotsu made an intentionally sulky face and crossed his arms. "That thing where you're all 'country, country' and making fun of us ain't cute either but the part where you'd seriously study through a correspondence course is the most not cute part about you."

"I have a consistent personality like that."

Well said, Tamotsu laughed. Natsuho laughed too and opened the note.

He didn't by any means like studying. To Natsuno this was the price he had to pay to get out of Sotoba. Whatever he had to do however, he wanted out of the village. If it was necessary, he'd do it. The thoughts of wanting out were urgent and so he continued was all it was.

(Even so, two more years...)

There was still that much more to go. Comforting himself with 'just two more

years' was getting harder recently. Since Megumi had died. Imprisoned in Sotoba, Megumi was unable to escape---that was the needle prodding sharply into his back pressing Natsuno to hurry. If I don't hurry, something was going to wrap itself around him like a spider's web and he wouldn't be able to untangle it. It might not be too bad to live here, he could get to thinking, losing all direction until he thought there wasn't really a need to leave the village, was there?

---Then why can't that happen, a voice inside of him head. Adapt to the village, get comfortable; if you stop wanting to leave the village, wouldn't that be a comfortable situation in its own right? Yet Natsuno couldn't but abhor such a situation. It made him imagine an empty shell. As peaceful as it would be, all that would be left was a groundless version of himself. He feared it likely.

Shaking his head once, he tackled the problem. Incidentally helping himself to the Mutous' dinner, he finished the day's assignment after ten o'clock. Saying his thanks to Tamotsu's parents, he left the Mutous. Out of cigarettes, Tohru went with him.

"The night wind feels really refreshing, don't it?"

TOhru looked up at the western mountain. The sounds of the insects were vigorous. Even so, the wind that blew down from the dark bare surface of the mountain as if it were invited was thought of as chilly.

"Wonder if it's gonna be fall soon at this rate."

"Who knows? It's not Higan week again yet, after all. But, summer was hot, so this year winter might come early."

"What, is there a rule like that?"

"Nah. Just a guess."

That part of you, Natsuno said giving Tohru a poke. Tohru gave a light hearted laugh, then suddenly went quiet.

TOhru pointed ahead on the road. It came sluggishly down the road from the Western mountain, through the heart of Sotoba. Further down that road was one house's family on a plot of land without a fence or anything else in it, where the truck stopped.They opened the container of the truck and piled their luggage in.

"Moving? At this hour." Tohru said as if amazed.

"They might be running away into the night. Literally."

Tohru laughed. Natsuno simply shrugged his shoulders. Come to think of it, said Tohru, seeing off the workers in mover's clothes as he continued. "The wife at Sanyasu ran away, I heard?"

"Mm?"

"There's a family called that in Naka-Sotoba. They're officially Yasumori, but. They say that Sanyasu's wife disappeared, like. That in the morning when they woke up she wasn't there."

"She ran away from home?"

"Guess so. She was a younger wife but like it sounds like she didn't get along well with her in-laws. She was always disagreeing with her husband, then like that finally their love went cold and she walked out, the story goes."

"That happens even out here?"

Tohru gave a wry smile. "Don't make fun of the country. Even out here normal stuff happens in its own way."

"Well then, I underestimated the place."

Natsuno said, Tohru giving him a light nudge in the back and starting to walk. Natsuno turned back a moment a bit to look at the truck. They probably weren't running away into the night. Such an imposing, huge truck, was hardly going to hide them from anything he thought. Even so, he wasn't satisfied with just saying they were moving at night.

Suddenly Natsuno remembered that he had heard the words 'moving at night' a while before too. Right, that was when they were moving in. The owners of Kanemasa. They moved in at night and then---Natsuno tilted his head. He'd heard rumors that they'd moved in and that the owners had been seen but Natsuno had never seen the owners that were now living there. As Tohru said, it ended without any connection to him at all. So long as Natsuno could leave in two years according to plan.

"What's up?" Tohru turned back to look at him.

It's nothing, Natsuno murmured jogging to catch up. Tohru smiled.

"... Jealous?"

Natsuno's scowled.

"That's not it!"

sinnesspiel

3

On Monday, as soon as Ohkawa Tomio heard Matsumura's voice on the phone he shouted. "Matsu, you punk, what the hell time do you think it is?!"

"I'm sorry." Matsumura's voice which normally sounded weak willed sounded like the hum of an insect over the phone now.

"We've gotten all kinds of orders this morning. Then it's going on noon and you still ain't shown. You gotta know Mondays're busy, but. Whadda you think I pay your salary for? If you got the time to call in, then just hurry up and come in!"

"....Uhm, about that."

Matsumura's voice was weak, and on top of that halting. This man's always like this, Ohkawa though clicking his tongue in his mind. Matsumura Yasuzou was ten years older than Ohkawa but it was a match as to who was more capable between he and his son Atsushi, Ohkawa thought. Matsumura was a coward by nature, so he just didn't have the guts to do anything wreckless without thinking trying to show off like Atsushi. That was why the only difference was that he could be at ease in trusting him with collecting payments. Other than that, his uselessness and his inability to give a firm and quick answer to anything brought out the same irritation in Ohkawa with only minor technical differences.

"If you got an excuse, say it when you get here. I ain't got the time to be having no leisurely phone chat."

Matsumura tried to get something out, but Ohkawa overtook him. He called to the young worker bringing in the beer cases in a loud voice.

"Oi, where're you parking? That ain't no place to be unloading!"

The young man making the delivery was about Atsushi's age. He turned the same resentful eyes on Ohkawa. It was a face he'd never seen before.

"Behind the storehouse. Go around the side, the side. You pack 'em up in front of the store and we can't do business. I always tell youse to drive down the alley,

but. What the hells you kids' problem!"

Without answeing that, the young man gave a single sharp glare to Ohkawa returning the load to the truck.

"Uhm.... Boss, the truth is, though?"

Watching the truck back up, Ohkawa, still holding the phone, remembered that Matsumura was on the other end again.

"To hell with what the damned truth is, already. You've been sniveling since this call started, what's up with you?"

"It's, uhm.... my daughter, uhm."

That was when at last Ohkawa realized Matsumur'a svoice was mingled with tears.

"Your daughter---Yasuyo-chan, eh?"

She was in about her mid twenties? She was nothing like her father, a brisk, level headed, good girl.

"....That's, uhm, she's gone, and."

"Gone? You're tryin' to say she died?"

"This morning, she was sick, I called an ambulance, but just now, it's come to a head. ....So, that's why."

His wife Kazuko made a dubious face as she looked to Ohkawa. Receiving her questioning gaze, Ohkawa gave her a nod.

"...I don't even know.... what I'm supposed to do now." Matsumura's voice was interrupted by sobs.

"You dumbass. At times like this, what's gonna happen if at least you don't get it together? Where're you now? The hospital? Which hospital? Aa---Anyway, I'll be right there. You called the regional manager?"

Yes he though, no he thought, Matsumura couldn't give a clear response. Ohkawa once again said that, anyway, he was coming there as he hung up the phone. Kazuko could hardly wait for that, quickly opening her mouth.

"Gone, you said, who? You can't possible mean Matsumura-san's Yasuyo-chan,

right?"

"It's possible enough to be true!"

Dear, Kazuko said. Atsushi had overheard while stocking the shelves and said, "What a waste" impudently, causing Ohkawa to glare at his son.

"Gotta go help him out. After all, Matsu's that kinda guy, you know." While he was speaking, possibly finished with unloading the cargo, theyoung man brought the delivery slip with him into the shop. Ohkawa carelessly signed it and took the receipt. "Anyway, probably oughtta call up the Kami-Sotoba regional manager too, huh? Matsu and his wife ain't the most reliable 'n all."

"That's true. ....I wonder if perhaps I should go too?"

"Go on. The deceased's still at the hospital so there's no rush. Before you leave the store call up the customers and say there's been a misfortune at the shop and deliveries'll be running late, yeah? The urgent ones we'll leave to Atsushi, the rest we'll push to another day."

Kazuko nodded. Her husband had a violent, short temper, but he was certainly not an unfeeling man, and while he was prone to fault finding he was equally prone to looking after those with faults. At times like this, without a doubt it'd be all right if left to her husband.

Ohkawa went to the back of the shop to look for Kami-Sotoba's regional manager's contact information. Kazuko drew the delivery memo slips towards herself and found the accounting book with the destination's phone numbers in the desk drawer. Coming from the depths of the house, perhaps told the situation by Ohkawa, her mother-in-law Namie appeared.

"Yasuyo-chan died, you say? The deaths keep coming this year, don't they."

"They do, don't they. Just a while ago," so she started when Kazuko's hand stopped. She wanted to say that Shimizu Gardening had just had a funeral but, there was something weighing on her even more than that. "....Say, Mother? Are there people who sleep with their eyes half open, do you suppose?"

"There probably are, aren't there? I've head about them."

They must, Kazuko said to herself.

"What is it? Why do you ask?"

To Nami's question Kazuko found herself frowning. "Yesterday, I went to Ohsawa-san's place, from the post office. Somewhere or another I hear Ohsawa-san seemed to be sick, so I thought I'd make a get well visit and see how he was. It wasn't anything special, his wife had been saying but when she opened the sliding door in the living room, I saw him sleeping through the gap."

The bedroom had a window and was brighter than even the living room. Ohawa was lying down facing the living room, so she had a good look at his face. His eyes were half lidded and unblinking, his body unmoving. His complexion was deathly pale, looking somehow flaccid, a strange sensation as if he had keeled over with old age.

"He looked like he had died."

Impossible, Namie said with a frown. "That just couldn't be, could it?"

"That's what I thought, but. Still, his face looked like that of a corpse! I couldn't very well say 'he's dead, isn't he?' to his wife but while I asked if it wasn't very bad, his wife said that it wasn't anything serious, that he was sleeping well."

"Then, that's it isn't it? If his wife said so."

That's true, Kazuko murmured. She saw Ohkawa off as he barreled out, tended to a few odd tasks, asked Namie to watch the store, then Kazuko prepared herself. It couldn't be helped; Atsushi couldn't be left in charge of the store while they were out. At that time, her reliable daughter and second son were at school.

She trotted out of the shop towards Kami-Sotoba. On the way she passed by the front of the psot office. For some reason, Kazuko's feet stopped, looking up to the second story that was the residence.

(...That was the face of a dead man.)

No matter what she couldn't shake that impression. As Kazuko thought to go into the post office, she realized the shutter door was still drawn down. Bewildered that there wasn't even a sign, Kazuko looked around. Her eyes met with Kumi from the Gotouda Clothing Shop across the street. Before she could enter the shop, Kumi came out herself.

"Say, what's going on, here?"

Kazuko pointed to the post office and Kumi tilted her head. Kumi's aged face seemed colored with surprise.

"About that, they've moved, don't you know. The Ohsawa-sans."

That can't be, Kazuko murmured. "That shouldn't be. Just last night I'd met with them."

"It was last night. In the middle of the night just past two, I suppose? A truck stopped out front, it was so loud I was woken up. When I got up, they were carrying their luggage out, it was a real surprise."

"That's---but, the husband was sick!"

Kumi gave a serious nod. "The moving company staff had to carry him into the carT He was wrapped all up in a blanket. I hurried out and caught the missus to ask what on earth was happening but she just said 'we have to move, so' and with just that and not neighborly word, she rode off in the truck!"

"My.... that's!"

"Nagata-san and the family weren't even contacted, it seems like. This morning he came to go to work as usual and lingered in front of the shutter. Why, I never new Ohsawa-san was the type of person to do something this outrageous!"

Me neither, Kazuko nodded. Ohsawa's half-lidded sleeping face (...a face that appeared dead) flashed before her eyes. A fluttering of fear bubbled up in her stomach. What could it have been, that unknown, terrible feeling?

sinnesspiel

4

On Tuesday at the end of the work day the band saw's roar was still echoing through the Ohtsuka Sawmill. Seishin looked at spectacle with deep emotion. The belt like band saw formed a bridge towards the rood of the sawmill building, sawdust falling and gathering from there; when he was small he would go into the Yasumori Sawmill and play, crawling under such gatherings. The pool of sawdust was more fascinating to children than a sand pit, and at the bottom of that pit were rhinoceros beetle and stag beetle larvae and pupa to be found.

There would be sawdust all over their bodies and of course they'd be scolded by their mothers, and the saw dust would get in beneath their clothing often, a feeling that was insufferably uncomfortable to a child, but it just meant that it held enough to be worth paying that price.

Gazing nostalgically at the sawmill, he didn't realize that Ohstuka Takayuki was nearby until he called out to him.

"If it isn't the Junior Monk!"

Called out to, at last Seishin returned to his senses. Meeting eyes with Takayuki who was still clad in work clothes, he hastily bowed his head.

"It has been a while."

When he raised his head, his eyes met with those of Ohtsuka Kichigorou who was supervising the saw. Kichigorou made an unpleasant face and averted his gaze.

The Ohtsuka Sawmill was a rival to the Maruyasu Sawmill. In the village there were several sawmill families but out of all of them it was these two who stood out from the rest in size. They had once been a parish family and he had heard they were even involved in the Parish Representative Committee but when Seishin went to college and returned from his ascetic training at the head temple to help here, they had already been extracted from the parish. Kichigorou's wife had entered a new religion, and Kichigorou had likewise joined into it. Seishni's

father Shinmei apparently tried coming many times on foot attempting to pursued them. It was probably due to the antagonism from that time that Kichigorou didn't get on well with those of the temple.

In regards to that his son Takayuki was either unaware of the antagonism from those days or he knew about it but didn't think of it as anything to be effected by, as he didn't get along with him exceptionally poorly. Even though he'd seen him about the village here and there, he'd never made a particularly sour face at him.

"It has been a while, hasn't it."

Takayuki showed a smile.

"It has been some time since we have made contact. I apologize for intruding while you're working."

"What might be the matter?"

"Just recently, I had overheard that Yasuyuki-san had passed away, you see."

Yeah, Takayuki said, showing an expression as if he had thrust into a sore spot. "For that, you came all the way out. ---Thank you very much."

Takayuki took off his work gloves and put them in the pocket of his work suit. While wiping his sweat he motioned to the office. "Well, come in. We don't have anything to offer beyond tea, though."

"Are not you in the middle of work? I had only thought to come to offer incense."

"It's all right. I was just thinking of wrapping up for the day."

Takayuki smiled and conveyed something to someone nearby, then went to the previously gestured office. Entering the office at the edge of the sawmill, Takayuki's wife Hiroko was at office desk with an open account book. Noticing Seishin, she stood and bowed a salutation to him.

"Oh my, it has been a while!"

"He says he's come to offer condolences for Yasuyuki."

When told that by Takayuki, she had a seemingly troubled smile as she said her

thanks.

"I'm sorry for being so sudden. I had thought that it might be to forward of me, but."

"It's quite all right. Thank you very much. To think that you would take the trouble to come all this way--"

Hiroko smiled, though she looked to be the definitive picture of someone crying, something that Seishin secretly felt with a pain in his conscience.

"For the time being, please enjoy the tea," Takayuki said, taking the pitcher of cold barley tea from the corner of the office and presenting him with a cup of it. He motioned towards an open seat.

"Truly, the occasion was very sudden...."

You've said it, Takayuki said with a forced smile. "He was a guy whose only good point was his heath, I couldn't imagine that he would go before me."

I'm certain, Seishin replied quietly. Going by what Takayuki and Hiroko said, as expected Yasuyuki was suddenly bedridden. It was probably a cold, and such stereotypical lines were heard around here as well. They took it lightly, not thinking that it could possibly come to this. In the middle of the night suddenly he thought he had heard groaning sounds, and he was convulsing, Takayuki puzzled. "We called an ambulance and had him brought to the national hospital. Our hearts were in our stomachs. He was rushed immediately into surgery but he did not come out alive. It seems we didn't make it in time."

"Is that so....."

"It seems there were problems with his liver. His jaundice was so faint, we didn't notice it ourselves, either. He wasn't a particularly heavy drinker, I didn't think there was any reason for there to be problems there. Really, this is what they mean when they say something is a complete surprise."

"This has been, I am most certain, a terribly difficult time. ....Have matters calmed?"

Yes they have, Takayuki said with a lonely smile. "When he first died, it was nothing but marital fights, though. I blamed his mother asking why she idn't

notice anything, I was working with him, why didn't I notice, she said blaming me. On top of that, Father being Father said that it was because we didn't have enough faith, then the people around were blaming it on the new aged religion, we'd heard them saying showily, which didn't help."

That's, Seishin said, frowning. "That sort of thing isn't relevant at all, is it?"

"To have the Junior Monk say as much is, if I can speak honestly, very gratifying," Takayki said as if deriding himself. "The bunch in the village---Ah, please do not take this as criticism of the temple---they're, as expected, critical of withdrawing from the parish. The temple and the village really are monolithic, and all. Actually, here and there, you know, people have been dragging away from us.We're like exiled outsiders, so I've thought before!"

Hiroko gave an interceding smile.

"Especially when, you remember, the old man was taken out of his position as the ward chief, wasn't he? It wasn't because of anything our household did, it was just that the old man was at that age but he'd gotten his belly button in a twist and said some unfortunate things, so things became unnecessarily complicated."

"Is that so...."

"For a while there, we got into nothing but fights everywhere." Takayukii forced a smile. "It was bleak inside the home, we were trying to have proper faith in our own way. Yet whenever we thought about why this happened to us, we thought, maybe we should lower our heads to the temple and return to the parish, or something."

"You musn't," Seishin promptly interjected. "It is not good for you to begin thinking in such a way. Faith is something organic, it is not something that can be coerced. It is the fulcrum of one's personal freedom, and so we must not distort it unnaturally."

Takayuki gave a surprised seeming blink. Seishin returned to himself and unintentionally hung his head in shame.

"Pardon me. .... For speaking strangely."

No, Takayuki laughed. "To have you say as much is a relief. ---Yeah?"

Takayuki smiled and turned to Hiroko. Hiroko also nodded.

"Yes.... Really."

He imagined just how harshly condemned such a manner of speaking would be. Certainly the village was united around the temple. A firm sense of unity was built upon a firmly enforced exclusion principle. And of all things the Ohtsuka Sawmill had always served on the Parish Representative Committee. A so-called pillar of the temple to suddenly become estranged from the temple, so he could imagine how the parishioners would perceive that.

"....At the beginning it was like that, really, nothing but fights everywhere. Our successor had died, and we even talked about how we might as well close up the sawmill and move, but. When we said that, our second son who had gone to the city said he would inherit it for us. Ah, we really musn't give ourselves up to despair."

"That is truly so." As Seishin answered, he remembered the unpleasant face his gentle father had shown so many times. His father who had rarely made a displeased expression made a clear one whenever the conversation turned to the Ohtsuka Sawmill. He didn't particularly find fault with them but it was clear Shinmei had no patience when it came to this for the people around them. At those times Seishin, unable to comprehend why his father was angry, could not help feeling the faintest sense of something like despondency towards his father. Despondency may be too deep a word for it but he remembered thinking that he didn't need to make that face. Looking at the current case, it may have been precisely because Shinmei was so flagrantly unpleasant that the parishioners followed the head monk's will to criticize Takayuki and his family. When he thought of that, Seishin felt it inexcusable.

"Lately it's calmed down. It's a shame about Yasuyuki but, I have the feeling that the family can somehow get through this, you know? ....It is true that we miss him, but."

"I'm sure you must."

But somehow, you know, said Takayui looking out the window. "Maybe it's my age, but I've been missing a lot lately. A disheartened feeling or something. It might be the season, too."

Seishin, for some reason or other, nodded.

"The old man is getting to that age and all, I start to think he won't live forever, or things like that. A girl from the neighborhood had died on Bon, hadn't she?"

"Shimizu--Megumi-chan, you mean?"

"Yes, that's right. Shimizu-san's place's daughter. She was such a young little thing, too. Maybe it's because my own house has had a funeral; whenever I go walking in the village these days, I get the feeling I'm seeing too many funerals really. Thinking about it, the people of the village are mostly old people you know. The heat is hard on the elderly, and there must be many of them who are feeling down. A young one from the sawmill suddenly ran away from home and quit her job, too. The elderly in the neighborhood are disappearing before you know it too."

At Takayuki's recollection, Seishin's brows knit together.

"Now that you mention it," Hiroko interrupted. "Suzuki-san? He left, didn't he. He was the same age as Yasuyuki. The family moved, they said. Lately, there are a lot of stories like that."

Seishin blinked. Hiroko gave a lonely seeming smile.

"Has everyone come to hate Sotoba, I wonder?"

That might be the case, Seishin thought.

---Therefore thou art cursed, no longer one of the land, an eternal vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

The village was like the hill, removing foreign substances.

(...It wouldn't be strange to come to hate it.)

sinnesspiel

5

Seishin spread out his manuscript in the office.His eyes ran

over the rewritten characters of the revised draft. In the silence of the night, the fading sound of God turning the pages echoed.

The older brother, ostracized from the hill for the sin of

killing his little brother, roamed the wasteland. The little

brother became a Shiki and followed him. The older brother didn't know why he went so far as to become that to follow him. Trying to look back on how his brother had been in life, as expected, he

couldn't deduce his little brother's intentions. Far from deducing it, he couldn't even clearly recall his little brother before he was a Shiki. Nor himself the moment he killed his little brother, nor his sentiments at that time.

And, thought Seishin as he lowered the sharpened tip of the

pencil to the paper like the tip of a sword. He

had to give up on surmising his little brother's true feelings

again today. Whenever he tried to gauge his little brother's

intent, without fail he would be obstructed in his groping quest for answers by his own confusion; while staring at him without any other means, regret gradually build up in his chest, and he

declined to think any more beyond that.
Hanging his head in shame, gazing at the shadow the color of his

own sin at his feet and then turning back, his eyes turned to the hill that, as he'd become accustomed to by now, didn't seem to be growing further away at all. Actually, his little brother was not chasing after him from behind. His little brother was surely

waiting in front of him to receive him.

Above the hill the clouds parted, golden afterglow raining down

incessantly. Within it was the white, clear, clear splendor.

Enshrined at the top of the town, the unforgiving light shone

towards him.

He had always, or at least for the time he had been on the hill,

been taught that to the east of that garden was a vast wasteland but actually standing in the wasteland looking at the hill, the hill was enclosed from all for directions by the wasteland. The reason that this land was said to be to the east may have only been because that was where the gate was.

The sterile and desolate lands fallen from God's hand was

supposedly this place where he wandered but, in actuality, the

greenery of the hill that existed in the middle of this sterile and desolate land was seen as a miracle of God, that hill beautifully arranged and placed in this wilderness.

Now he thought on it as mysterious. Did the wasteland exist around the hill or did the hill exist within the wasteland? Did the high ramparts enclosing the foot of the hill denote the terminus of

God's order, or instead did it note the boundaries of God's

miracle?

In either case, the hill was beautiful.

Seishin stopped for a bit and tilted his head. He was being

chased by the hill. Would the hill he saw when turning back to look over the wilderness be seen as beautiful after all? Far from having any killing intent towards his brother, he didn't know the source of his own impulse.

That should have been to him a very shocking tragedy. In

judgement for that, he was cursed and chased. That order that

pressured him, the hill that he had been shut out of, was it

something that he could praise so impartially?

(Of course, he could...)

He even now yearned for the hill he had been expelled from. From

the beginning, that had been what he had intended.

In either case, the hill was beautiful. If he closed his eyes,

he could remember how it looked to him.

Green fields drew gentle undulations, there white sheep herded,

feeding in peace on the grass that spread out to the green forests.

The houses that dotted it were lined together by a red stoned path, rising up towards the street where the sage lived, levying heavy taxes. The spire stood tall in the center of the town, at the top of which was the seat of God. None but the one chosen as the sage were allowed to climb it, and were they to climb it there would be not but the downpour of splendorous light; it had no form of which to speak but clearly there existed a will there.

(And he worshiped that will.)

---Even though it ostracized him?

(To him, the hill was a place that should be loved....)

At the center of that spire shone on by the splendor, drawing

concentric circles, spreading out and downward towards the outside, a single hill's mound was shaped.

Surrounding the spire was the temple where the sage lived, and

around the temple was the stone paved town. The surrounding

outskirts of the village were lined in sprawling forests. The

beautiful and quiet forest of beautifully linked branches was

itself enveloped in the blueish greens of the fields.

The green fields expanded without end, eventually the greenery

being mixed at intervals with white stones and red clays. At the ends of the lands of gently undulating hills which green draped over like a moss were gigantic castle walls.

(Gigantic walls... Obstinate,

The sturdy ramparts, as if to shroud from the eyes of those who

dwelt outside of it,

as if to reject the sinners exiled for eternity,

spread out, and then, at that eastern block, a small closed

gate.

so that they could never return again...)

Seishin sighed hugely and abandoned his pencil. This is no good,

he thought. His thoughts were slipping. He couldn't stop Ohtsuka Takayuki and Hiroko's faces from flashing faintly through some part of his mind
Sotoba was firmly united. On the other side of that unity was an

obstinate tendency towards exclusion. Those who weren't parish

families of the temple were, to the village, foreign substances.

Rather, those who were formerly parish families that had defected from the temple would only naturally be seen as enemies more than foreign substances. They had cast off the faith that managed the villagers and took their leave for another faith of their choosing.

Even when considering people's tendency to form groups, they

couldn't help ostracizing those who those who were separated out like that. But, Seishin thought. Why did groups of people have no choice but

to act this way? Faith's foundation was of the heart, was it not something that brought about public peace through people's hearts?

That it was separating people, becoming a just cause for

ostracizing people---and that nobody had misgivings nor shame about that, Seishin had a difficult time standing.
Gentle smiles for those who were internal, and while showing that

affection and love, showing those on the outside cold indifference and cruel conduct. That two sidedness could be felt most bleakly.

Or was he the only one who struggled with such things as

this?
With a disheartened breath, Seishin piled up his manuscripts. He

wanted to continue with it but his writing just wasn't flowing. All the more self-conscious of his struggles, he gave up and returned the manuscript to the drawer. In exchange he took out the memo pad with the notes he'd gathered but, he didn't even feel like opening it. Having given up on even that, Seishin stood. Leaving the

office, he took the flash light off of the shelf in the entryway in hand and went outside.
The presence of fall hid within the winds that blew through the fir trees. The voices of the insects were, different from their summer timbre, sounding somehow lonely. He took a glance at the sleeping village and crossed the temple grounds. Pushing his way through the mountains, he knew that fall, hiding within the forest and its

underbrush, was looking to come out of hiding. Walking quietly, he headed straight to the abandoned building. Nowhere in the village, trying to live secluded out here, in this sanctuary that was

naturally looked upon as an enemy to the system and order of which the temple was a nucleus, the one drug out of here

was---*him*.
As if to note the recluse's biter mortification, the sanctuary

inclined, falling into ruin. Entering within, there was the voice of one single cricket echoing desolately. The lonely chirping

faded, then as if realizing that it had faded sounded again.
Seishin himself didn't remember when he lit the lamp. If he was

just going to be spacing out doing nothing, he wouldn't need lamp light. None the less, he realized when he heard the sound of the sanctuary door opening that he might have remembered in his

subconscious that Sunako had appeared once saying it was because she had seen the light.
When he turned his head, Sunako was walking down the short nave of the

church. Brushing lightly along the backs of the benches lined up on one side, light footsteps approached.
"Good evening."
"Hi," was all Seishin returned.
"I'm just saying this for your benefit, but this is the first time I've come here since the last time. I've been behaving well in my home, you know. So, do somehow overlook it this time, won't

you?"
Seishin smiled and nodded.
"And for the record, I had applied bug spray before coming, and as you can see I've worn long sleeves with closed cuffs. I'm wearing two layers of stockings, you know. I do hope that with this

Muroi-san understands that I am not trying to disregard his

warnings?"
"....I know."
I'm glad, Sunako murmured, taking a seat on the bench directly in

front of Seishin. She sat little kit on the bench, both of her

elbows on the back of the pew.
"Ebuchi and mother were most grateful. Of course, they absolutely

won't leak it to the outside. ---To begin with, they wouldn't have either way, but."
"I see..."
"Is it the same as ever? You look depressed."
Seishin smiled bitterly. "I see.... I guess it is as usual. It

looks like things have gotten a bit worse. But I can't see any

solution."
Sunako nodded as if to urge him on, so Seishin briefly expressed

that he'd been looking for common points amongst the victims but, regardless, hadn't been able to find any clues.
"With your duties to the temple, even while you have a job as an

author, it must be hard. And yet with no results, it's a given that Muroi-san

would be making such a face."
"Do I look that depressed?"
"You do. The same as last time. You look down." Sunako said with a small laugh. "Every time we meet here, it is certain that Muroi-san will be depressed, isn't it? Is it possible you run away to here when you are depressed?"
Seishin blinked. "Ah.... Indeed. You may be right."
"You weren't aware of it?"
"I guess I wasn't. That's right---it does certainly seem to be like this more often, overwhelmingly."
"It's better not to be too discouraged. After all, Muroi-san is not an epidemic specialist."
Seishin smiled faintly and shook his head. "It's not as if I'm particularly down about the lack of results."
"Then, why? Did some one pass away again?"
"No---. I've been following the victim's footprints, you see, and it's more than I'd come to know some not-too pleasant things."
"Not too pleasant things?"
Mm, Seishin looked out into the half destroyed interior of the sanctuary.
"Sotoba is a good place. There are many good tempered people living here, and it makes for a peaceful cycle. But because of that, the power to push aside any foreign substances is strong."
Sunako tilted her head, and then nodded as if understanding something. "I think that I understand. To be warm to those close to you means to be cold to those who are not. ---Is it like that?"
Right, Seishin nodded. Sunako put her chin in both of her hands, resting on the back of the pew. ".....And so, Muroi-san has come to hate the villagers?"
"No. That isn't it."
"You've come to hate the village maybe. So while you're suffering

for the village's sake, you're sickened by it."
"That isn't what it is. Because I think that the power to gather

people also being the power to exclude is an unavoidable

providence. Surely that's the kind of being humans are. So I don't condemn it. But, I do think it's a little bit of a shame."
"If that's the case, then you'll have to cheer up. You have to

investigate it properly and hurry up and solve what's happening. If the disease spreads like this, the villagers will end up noticing, and then Muroi-san will experience something even more

painful."
That pricked at Seishin's heart. Gazing seriously at Sunako's face, he understood that that was true.
Indeed, it was so. If the situation kept worsening like this,

eventually, the villagers would notice the existence of the

sickness. If they did that, what would happen? The unions that were protected by going so far as to exclude others would be cut. Be they members of the same parish, be they bound by blood or regional bonds, fearing contamination, they would begin to ostracize each other. There was no way to avoid it.
"....It's just as you say."
"Isn't it? People are fragile when cornered. They're very weak

beings."
Seishin nodded. ---Yes, this was no time to be down. He didn't have the time to struggle with something like this.
And, in his own heart Seishin felt shamed. It was no time for

escaping into his manuscripts either. Even if just a moment sooner, he had to find a way to stop this calamity. Before the village

brought about its own end from within.

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Cultural and Translation Notes

4 - 1

MODS - Multiple Organ Dysfunction Syndrome

, previously known as MOF for Multiple Organ Failure. MODS was the only one not defined explicitly in the chapter. Commonly the result of sepsis which leads to reduces in blood flow to the relevant organ systems. In typical MODS, this is because of disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC, mentioned in chapter) syndrome, or abnormal blood clotting which leads to organ systems breaking down due to not getting enough blood to function.

4 - 2

Gripping your thumb in your fist

when a hearse or funeral procession passes by is a childhood superstition, similar to the one avoiding stepping on cracks to keep your mother from breaking her back in English. The thumb in Japanese is called the oya-yubi; oya is Japanese for parent(s) so it could be read as the parent finger. The idea is that you're hiding them from death.

Japanese tradition calls

salt

a purifier. Salt is placed in piles in front of restaurants supposedly to ward off evil as well as to usher in patrons. These can be seen out front of many businesses.

Sample image

from Wikimedia Commons. Accepted a tradition as it is, if Chigusa had never had one before, it would be potentially offensive to suddenly put one out because so many patrons were coming in after funerals.

At funerals small packets of salt may be offered to throw in front of your house before returning to ward off evil spirits from following you inside.

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1

"Boss, it has been a while."

Called out to by Seishin, Shimizu Masaji who was working in the plantation spread out behind his house turned to look. "Ah--Junior Monk!"

"You are putting your energy into work, I see."

The old man stood up, taking his hat in hand and bowing his salt-and-pepper haired head. At Masaji 's feet were a line of green seedings for some sort of plant.

Shimizu Gardening also did landscaping and took part in wholesale sales of young trees. If asked by villagers, he would also sell them directly. Seishin's own mother Miwako sometimes came to buy seedlings for the garden.

"It is still hot these days, isn't it. What may I do for you today?"

"Actually, the other day, I had belatedly heard that Ryuuji-san had died."

Ah, Masaji's expression clouded. "That's, well, thank you very much." He put down his plow in the bucket and motioned towards the house. "Well first, please, do come inside."

Seishin bowed his head slightly and followed after Masaji after he stood.

"I was surprised. The last time I'd seen him he seemed healthy..."

You said it, Masaji said while climbing up onto the porch with a sigh. As guided Seishin entered into the tatami room and continued in front of the family altar. The altar was decorated with a new photo and mortuary tablet. His son Ryuuji was according to the records 41, and worked, he believed, at an accounting office. As he offered the incense and folded his hands together, Masaji brought in the barley tea.

"It isn't much but, please. You'll have to forgive me, today my daughter-in-law

is out. I thought we had had some snacks somewhere, but."

"Please don't fuss. ---You must be depressed as well, Boss. Have your feelings settled?"

Masaji gave a forced smile. "It hasn't connected with me yet. He really was a healthy fella, after all. I went out to work like always, then there was talk that he collapsed at the office. When I rushed to the hospital, he'd already lost consciousness. And then he never opened his eyes since."

"I had heard that there were heart problems, but?"

Masaji shook his head, saying not at all. "During his spring check up, he was fit as a fiddle. The heart failure was so sudden. ---No, he did have signs he wasn't well, come to think of it. It's just, it only seemed he was out of it at the time. I wondered if he'd stayed up late or was hung over and it came to this. Honestly...." Masaji trailed off. "It's only something I remember because it came to this. It's something I only remember now that you mention it, looking back. I didn't think anything of it the day I saw it, just going out like always into the fields, not even taking a good look at his face."

"Then, he wasn't especially bedridden or anything of that nature?"

"He wasn't really bedridden. ....No, this whole year, my son's health hasn't been something I could really sum up. He might have been sick but it wasn't enough for even my daughter-in-law to notice, so I didn't think anything in particular about it at all."

Is that so, Seishin murmured. Whether Shimizu Ryuuji had it or not wasn't clear. Dying within a few days of his family noticing was customary but Ryuuji was a few days faster than that. It might have been that his case progressed exceptionally fast, or it might have been completely unrelated to the relevant matter. Seishin couldn't ascertain which it was.

"But... As this was truly something sudden, it must have been difficult."

"More than on me, it's his wife. I shouldn't say this, but these things do happen. It's just, I feel for my daughter-in-law and grandson. All said, I've lost my spouse, so without my daughter-in-law and grandson, I'd be alone. That grandson come next spring will graduate from high school and go on to college

and to get a job, so once he's out of the house, it'll just be two old people with no blood relatives left. I told her she could go back to her own family, but. Shuuji isn't here anymore but still having her there to water me on my death bed makes me feel sorry for her." As Masaji spoke, an unaffected but forced smile floated up onto his face. "In the past, I would've said 'well she married into this family now so' but the times have changed, so."

Is that so, Seishin thought. In the village, parents and children lived in mutli-generational households as a matter of course. But, the concept of family was indeed changing. A yet incomplete transformation. It was... jarring.

"...Still, she said she couldn't by any means abandon me on my own but I'm sure it's weighing on her. Even though having her spouse go on ahead of her is calamity enough, having head-ache inducing problems that she does makes you feel for her. He's being paid his retirement sum, she'll at least get that, but."

Seishin tilted his head. Masaji's smile became all the more wry. "The day my son collapsed, you know? On that day, that Ryuuji, I don't know what he was thinking but it seems he suddenly put in his retirement notice. Me and my daughter in law didn't know about it, don't know what was in his heart at the time. His office didn't process it but that Ryuuji said he had to stop that day, shouting caustically that he didn't need severance pay or his pay check. He was fighting with the accountant, then suddenly collapsed, it seems. When we heard that as the hospital, his wife went ghostly pale. We still need that money to raise our grandson, and all."

"That's..."

"Still, the accountant was compassionate, he made like it never happened for her. He died in the office but it's being handled as if he retired, which is a big help. Really---That son of mine, what was he thinking?"

The old man looked up at the photo of the deceased.

"When they get to that age, we're as good as strangers. Even if we live together, that's because this is the country; if it were the city, he'dmove out and have his own home at his age. It's a matter of appearances. He can't go on asking his father for advice about everything. So, even while it's obvious...."

That's true, Seishin murmured. "Then, was Ryuuji-san no longer offering his

assistance to you as the Boss? In the past, I had seen you working together very many times, hadn't I?"

"Nah, not lately, I guess. In the past he didn't unless we were really needing the help. We do landscape gardening, but that isn't what we focus on, so we don't have many hands on deck for that kind of work."

"Then, he did not have any intent to inherit the business to become the next Boss, I suppose."

"I don't think he did. I don't think he was of a mind for it. I didn't intend for him to either, after all."

And so it seemed that Masaji didn't come and go to many places throughout the village. While he thought of it, he asked about Masaji's working arrangements. He asked about whether he'd come and gone from any homes, whether he'd gone to Yamairi, or how about the Maruyasu sawmill, whether Ryuuji had ever gone to such places with him. He had intended to ask indirectly but Masaji himself apparently hadn't gone to Yamairi or to Maruyasu, so it seemed Ryuuji had no connections with them either. Nor did he go into the mountains. Masaji's household didn't own any mountain lands. Masaji and Ryuuji both lived in Sotoba but they made their livings almost entirely in Mizobe, so as far as interacting with their neighbors it seemed they had no such ties at all.

"We do have relatives in Monzen, though," said Masaji with a strained smile. "In the past, any time anything happened, we'd be coming and going from each other's places often but since my cousin died, our ties had been cut. This isn't an age where you go to visit your dead father's cousin as a relative anymore, is it?"

That's true, was all Seishin answered.

Leaving Masaji's house, Seishin went towards Naka-Sotoba. He visited the elder Koike, the funeral manager. Hirosawa Takatoshi who died on August 11th had been a resident of Naka-Sotoba. As Seishin had no connections with that Hirosawa household, for the time being he would try visiting Koike, who could be called an influential man in Naka-Sotoba but it seemed Koike didn't know them very well either.

Human relations were interwoven like a complicated net, Seishin had felt. He

had the impression that the people of the village had a regional bond that expanded throughout the village. But, that regional bond had at some point had been severed at certain points. Without the people themselves being conscious of it, the village followed the trensd of the era, being dismantled bit by bit.

So this is how it is, Seishin thought. Seishin himself was at the center of the parish families. Being the focal point of so many complicated interpersonal relationships, he hadn't sensed the changes that had taken place. But, bit by bit the village was changing. ----Seishin wasn't the only one who thought that. The elder Koike too shook his head with a sigh.

"In the past, if you asked me about someone from somewhere, I'd know what kind of person they were and how they made a living as if they were my own relative or family, but."

"Is that so?"

"I intended to at least get to know his parents. His father was grieving about it. It seems he suddenly collapsed in Mizboe. And they say he collapsed in a Pachinko parlor, like. He was sure he was going to work but he'd quit his job."

Eh? Seishin asked at that. "His job, he quit?"

"Seems like it. Without a word to his parents. For two or three days he'd been sick, right, unsteady on his feet, but he still went out in his business suit, so they thought he must be going to the company as usually but the company said he quit three days ago. But he was wasting his time at the Pachinko parlor. And that's where he collapsed."

Seishin blinked. What on earth was this? It was similar to Shimizu Ryuuji----.

Perhaps not noticing Seishin's bewilderment, the elder Koike forced a smile. "It's a lonely way to go but there's no helping it, is there? It's sad that we're not long for this world." With that said, Koike tilted his head. "But, what is with these continuing deaths, I wonder, huh?"

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2

Monday, September 18th was Megumi's 35th day memorial service.

"With this it's the end of the mourning period it looks like," said her mother Sachiko on the way to Megumi's house. It was past the middle of September and the boiling heat wave had receded.

"End or the mourning period?"

"Forty-nine days they say, don't they. After the 49th day the dead person's soul leaves the home. Since you're not mourning any more it's the end of the mourning. The 49th Memorial day service is when they're really supposed to end the morning but that'd be in October. They say it's not good for the mourning period to span three months. So they're cutting it short and having the end of mourning on the 35th day it looks like."

Kaori hung her head. That's strange, she thought. Whether Megumi's soul was in the house or whether it wasn't didn't change the fact that Megumi had died. Yet when 49 days had passed, you were supposed to clear away the sadness and the sympathy.

And in Megumi's case it wasn't even 49 days. It was still the 35th day, so even though Megumi's soul still hadn't moved on, it was like they were hurrying to chase her out, she thought.

(Megumi.... You poor thing....)

Dying was piteous. You were just cleaned away like this. For certain at this rate she would become "something finished." Certainly Megumi's life had finished on that summer day but Megumi's death had just Megumi, only 45 days had passed. Even though it was something that would never be "finished" so to speak.

Kaori followed with her head hung behind Sachiko who seemed somehow relieved. When they reached Shimizu Megumi's house, there were many guests gathered who, like Sachiko, had seemed to somehow have felt too at ease. Only

Megumi's parents and grandfather didn't seem as if they were getting a burdensome weight off their shoulders. They were just as they'd been during the funeral, looking grief stricken. Kaori was just a little comforted by that.

There was still time before the service started. Sachiko went to help in the kitchen. Kaori moved to do the same but was told to refrain from joining the mourning crew's women. Indeed the kitchen was already full with women attendants from the neighborhood, so as urged Kaori went to the second floor. Megumi's room was as it had been, her nameplate still hanging on her door. Of course it was---at least until today, Megumi was in this house. Or was she no longer here? When did Megumi depart from the house? Would she be driven out once the service started?

(Almost like it's an exorcism.)

The Buddhist chants given were the same after all, so maybe that was exactly what it was in truth. Offering scriptures, Megumi's soul would, in pain, leave the home. With no choice she would leave the home, then everyone would say good grief and clear away Megumi's death.

(Even this room...) Kaori thought while looking over the room as it had been not even changed in the slightest. (Will it be cleanred away, I wonder?)

Kaori was shocked by her own thoughts. It was because she was imagining the room as an empty cavity, with her furniture and personal artifacts promptly removed.

"That's.... no."

The room where Megumi lived. This was where Megumi was. Megumi's desk, Megumi's bed. Even if there was indeed no longer an owner, they were Megumi's things, not anybody else's. The things Megumi cherished. The curtains and bed cover were chosen by Megumi. The accessories and miscellaneous goods bought with her allowance, Megumi's heart would be broken when they were gathered up. The stuffed animal Kaori had given her as a present, mementos of trips, they were all things Megumi cherished, so nobody but Megumi had the right to dispose of them. And yet she disappeared from this world. And likewise traces of Megumi's life would be wiped away.

She didn't want that. Megumi's death shouldn't be something that could be so

easily forgotten like this. When somebody died, it was supposed to be a more weighty disaster. One you never forgot throughout your life, like a wound in the heart. It wasn't supposed to be something so frivolous you could put some kind of 35 day limit on it.

Kaori looked around her surroundings in panic. She had the feeling that soon now the women helper of the mourning crew would be coming up to clear away the room. It was the end of mourning, so by the end of today Megumi would be gone from the house. So Megumi didn't need a room, they'd say.

Should she try asking Megumi's parents? Please don't dismiss Megumi, don't take apart her room at your convenience. Please don't clear Megumi away like that.

---If she asked that, would they listen to it?

Sachiko's face floated before her eyes. Her mother who said to clear away Megumi's death. If it was Sachiko, she was surely saying the same to Megumi's parents. Clear it away, that in order to do that it was better to take apart Megumi's room. Hiroko might have held the same sentiments.

They weren't in mourning anymore so let's clear it away, and enjoy life in Megumi's stead. Any and everything in Megumi's room, sorted and disposed of. ---It might be. What was here, all of it was very important to Megumi and yet adults didn't usually hold any respect for what children called "important things"

"That's no good, something like that."

At least something, Megumi thought, her eyes wandering the room. Before it was disposed of, Kaori had to take something from here for safe keeping. Yes---she should do that. Some souvenir of Megumi. Kaori wouldn't forget. She wouldn't put her away. She would cherish and preserve "Megumi."

Her eyes looked aroudn the desk. The calendar beneath the desk mat was still on August. Megumi's calendar was halted there. When she had put it in place, she probably didn't think that this would be the last month. There was a text book she was only a third of the way through, stationary with an unopened seal on it.

(....Megumi's not here anymore.)

Kaori examined Megumi's shelves and drawers, searching for "Megumi" herself. All she found were nothing but fragments of Megumi, making her realize all the more that Megumi was no long here. There was no Megumi. That existence had vanished. What remains here were fragments that were far far short of "Megumi."

Searching about her as if about to cry, Kaori's hand stopped. Beneath the deskmat, within the calendar she found the postcard.

Megumi's writing. A late summer greeting written for him. Only having it written, without being able to send it, Megumi died. Even though it was so precisely written.

(Megumi.... you wanted to send this, didn't you?)

Thinking of that, the tears spilled out. While crying, Kaori snuck it into her pouch. This was short of "Megumi" Even this was not "Megumi." But, Megumi wouldn't want her family to see this. If her room was being taken apart it would be found, and then this unsent late summer greeting would be thrown straight away. That was the one thing she didn't want to let happen.

"It's all right, Megumi...." She wouldn't let them throw it away. She hugged her pouch closely. "...Let's go home together."

She'd bring her back to her house. After today, she couldn't be here anymore after all. Until that 49th day, she could be in Kaori's room. Until the day she naturally went off somewhere far away.

"It's all right, I won't clear you away."

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3

When the door opened, Hasegawa looked up. "Well, well. This is unusual."

It was the electronics shop's Katou. It wasn't that Katou coming to the shop was rare but today he had brought his son Yuusuke along. Hasegawa put out two glasses on the counter in front of the two seated at the counter. "You're together. Today is---Ah, it's Sunday, huh?"

The day of the week often slipped his mind. Creole didn't have set closed days. Since it was a shop opened originally as a hobby, so they planned to treat it as something they could close whenever it was a pain but Hasegawa enjoyed having the shop open more than he expected, so it was largely opened every day of the year. In the past the shopping district was habitually closed on Sundays as if it were only natural but lately there were more stores open on Sunday, and while before shops closed at five or six, this too was being slowly stretched out into later hours. This too may have been what they called a sign of the times perhaps.

"Yuusuke-kun, what'll it be?"

When asked, Yuusuke's eyes lowered as if shy. He'd always been a shy child. He was particularly reticent towards Hasegawa but since Hasegawa had lost his son, he was indiscriminately doting on little boys. He was always comparing them to his son, and in that remembering this and that, which may have been the reason. When he'd first lost him, remembering was sad but four years had passed and now nothing but nostalgia warmed his heart.

"Mm?" When pushed to decide Yuusuke responded 'ice cream' quietly. Katou smiled. "Yuusuke picked up someone's wallet today."

"Oh ho?"

"It seems it was a girl's, there was an ID card in it. He brought it to the police to turn it in and we were going to have ice cream as a reward, I said."

"I see. That's very good, Yuusuke-kun."

"But he wasn't there, the resident officer." Yuusuke said, making a troubled face as he looked up to his father.

"That's right," he nodded to his son before looking to Hasegawa. "Hasegawa-san, have you met the replacement resident officer?"

Nope, Hasegawa murmured. Takami-san died, and afterwards an officer named Sakaki took his place.

"About that? I have never seen him either. It's always vacant isn't it, the police substation."

"Isn't it. ...That's strange."

"Tashiro-san tried to peek in a couple of times though. Since the book shop is catty-corner from the police box. It looks like he isn't a very sociable person. Even calling out to him he doesn't reply, Tashiro-san was scowling."

"Heh...." Hasegawa offered out an especially large bowl of ice cream. "Even though you went through the trouble, it's a shame, isn't it?"

So he said with a smile to Yuusuke. Thank you, he said in a small voice. Watching over that with a smile, Katou said "I left a note and left the wallet on top of the desk, though. But, is it all right for him to never be there?"

"That's true. Well, it's a peaceful village, and Takami-san was also always saying he was bored, he was bored. But I'm not so sure now. If every time you go by, the resident officer isn't around, it's still a little worrysome, isn't it?"

Yes, Katou nodded.

"....The Kirishikis at Kanemasa are one example; the people moving in here lately seem to mostly be the withdrawn type, don't they?"

"You've said it. I've only heard rumors they've come, I've never seen them, it's been nothing but those types. It leaves a strange impression doesn't it, very much so."

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4

Seishin finished chanting the sutras and turned back around. The people of the Ohkawa family bowed their heads.

"Thank you very much," Ohkawa Tomio said as Kazuko brought in the tea. It was Ohkawa Gigorou who died in Yamairi's 49th day after death. Has that much time passed already? thought Seishin.

"Now it's a load off of our shoulders. Even for that old buzzard, you gotta take care of the mortuary tablet you know?"

Seishin had no particular comment. Keeping quiet he took the tea cup put out in hand. It was a desolate end of mourning attended only by family. Gigorou had children who came with their spouses, and they came with their own children but maybe it wasn't worth coming to the memorial services. Each of them had moved so far away so when you thought of that maybe it seemed obvious but he still couldn't help thinking it felt lonely.

Sotoba's unity was firm. It was firm in its consciousness of who was 'in' and at the same time that firm exclusionary principle rested upon that. Maybe that was why there was a tendency for all of those who had left the society of the village, without even a one percent exception rate, shirked the village as if they'd been dispossessed by an evil spirit on leaving. Once they moved out, the person themselves as well as those who had been around them probably had the feeling that they were now outsiders, Seishin thought.

"Either way, this is just one part of your day. Seems the Shimizu's gots a service today too. The Junior Monk must be working hard."

"No. I am sure it is hard on the Boss as well."

You said it, Ohkawa said shaking his head. "Even just a whole ago, yeah? Our Matsu's place's daughter died. Even though she was still young."

Aa, Seishin nodded. He knew that he was talking about Kami-Sotoba's Matsumura Yasuyo.

"He himself could barely keep himself standing, his wife bein' who she is, sobbed and wailed herself about unconscious. In the end I was the one who gave the funeral. They say what comes twice comes thrice but this is one thing I don't wanna have to do a third time."

"Oh, yes."

"Since then Matsu's been taking off from work. Even though even with him here we're short on help. On top of that they've got a fresh face doing our deliveries now. Our arrangements are just falling apart in here. With all that it's been a whirlwind o' business to take care of in here. I'm tellin' ya."

That must be hard on you, Seishin replied at once. At Ohkawa's side his wife Kazuko looked to be unsettled over something.

"Even so, there have been many funerals, haven't there? It's like, I wonder just what has happened to this village, that's what I start thinking, these days."

Seishin didn't have the proper words to respond to that with. Suspicions were on the rise. And growing stronger at that. Soon enough the dam would break and it would come flowing out. And as for what would happen when it did---.

Without knowing Seishin's thoughts, Kazuko only tilted her head. "How to put this... it feels strange. Something's wrong, but I can't put my finger on it. Just recently too, the Post Office closed down, didn't it?"

As, Seishin nodded. Was it Mitsuo who had been talking about that? He'd heard they'd moved, if he recalled.

"It's just another strange story, don't you think?" Kazuko said, Ohkawa making a disgruntled face.

"You're still talking about that?"

"Well it

was

strange! You can say that because you didn't see it. But, it happened right before my eyes. The more I think about it the more I think those was the face of a dead man!"

Seishin blinked. "Uhm... What was that?"

Aa, Ohkawa made a sullen face. "From the post office, yeah? Ohkawa-san died, she keeps saying, this old girl. She went to pay a get-well visit and saw his face, saying it was a dead face. There's no way that'd be the case, but."

With his last words, he turned towards Kazuko. Kazuko looked at Ohkawa resentfully.

"Like I said, I really can't think of it any other way! And even so, that night they moved, didn't they? In the middle of the night!

I

think it's strange!"

"Pardon me but.... It was in the middle of the night?"

"That's just it!" Kazuko nodded. "They said he was sick, so I went to pay a get weill visit. When I did, his pallor alone was enough to make me think he could possibly have already been dead. But, moving to another home when someone's ill? And it was at night no less! And furthermore when I went to pay a get well visit, there wasn't a single word about them moving. In the first place, the inside of the house was the same as ever, not a single bag packed up!"

That's enough already, Ohkawa chided his wife. Kazuko looked up at Ohkawa dissatisfied. "Well I mean, isn't that just creepy? Really, I don't know what's happening in this village anymore...."

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5

Seeing her parents off, Shimizu Hiroko felt both dejected and relieved. Her parents from her birth family had both come to stay at the home for the memorial service. She knew that they went through the trouble of staying for three days because they were worried about Hiroko's own depression. But, on top of having lost her daughter, Hiroko was self-conscious of her own depleting will power. She shunned paying attention to her parents and at the same time shunned being paid attention to.

She opened the entryway as if unloading a burden from her shoulders, heading into the house only to see how empty it was. The electric lights were bright white. The village at night was dead quiet and the frail voices of insects sang of vestiges of fall.

With Megumi gone, there was a Megumi shaped emptiness in the house. While her parents were about, their presence glossed over that but with both of them gone, it was all the more exposed. Her father-in-law Tokurou and her husband too had lost their vitality since Megumi's death. The presence of people had faded from the house and there were many times when the sound of the TV echoed futilely. She had thought that emptiness suited her own mood, a reason why all the more she couldn't help thinking her parents presence was ill suited and yet when the two had gone the inside of the house was indeed lonely.

Hiroko sighed and went towards the living room. Her father and law and husband were both watching the surface of the TV without a word. Even if she joined in and made it three people, it probably wouldn't lead to it feeling like there were people gathered together there.

Hiroko went to sit without a word at the dining room table. Nobody said anything to Hiroko, and Hiroko said nothing to anybody. On the table was an open notebook with the costs of the service in them. She didn't want to do anything but if she didn't do something time would fail to pass. It was like being a prisoner of time but even if she thought of ways to kill the time, that

imprisonment wouldn't end.

Without a word Tokurou stood and left the living room. Hiroko and Shimizu both watched that, without asking where he was going or what he was doing. Without Tokurou, unable to bear the building silence, Hiroko opened her mouth.

"....What did you talk with the Junior Monk about?"

"Hm?"

"After the service, I was wondering what you were talking so deeply about."

Ah, Shimizu murmured. Before Megumi had gone missing did she seem to be acting weird in any way, did she go out anywhere from the latter half of July or in August or not. Had she ever gone to Yamairi, was she familiar with a man called Gotouda Something, if he'd ever heard anything like that.

Hiroko was silent to Shimizu's low answer, the conversation coming to an abrupt halt. While Shimizu too was silently trying to place his thoughts, he thought that he hadn't thought much himself about the answer.

He didn't think Megumi went to Yamairi. He didn't think she had known a man called Gotouda Shuuji. But he wasn't certain. What kind of man Gotouda was, Shimizu neither knew or asked but just maybe, he thought. ---In the dead Megumi's room was the lingering faint scent of perfume.

That scent that even now lingered faintly tormented Shimizu. It wasn't air fresher, it was perfume. Hiroko wasn't in the habit of wearing that on a daily basis. Shimizu had wondered about it at the time but the scent that lingered in the room was one that somebody her age might put on trying to put on airs for somebody, he murmured then. When Megumi had collapsed in the mountains, a few heartless neighbors intimated that what happened to her was obvious. Shimizu himself worried about it. Even if Toshio said not to worry about that, could he really believe the assurances of a doctor who said that it was just anemia?

Something probably happened to Megumi. Megumi had probably put on that perfume for somebody. When had his daughter transformed into a "woman"? Shimizu had not only lost his daughter to death but had lost sight of her as well.

".....He asked some strange things."

At first for a moment Shimizu didn't know what the isolated words Hiroko had spoken were about, what they were in regards to--who they were even at. When he turned about absentmindedly, Hiroko was looking at him.

"....Aa....Yeah, he did."

"Who was this Gotouda person?"

"Who knows."

"Did that person perhaps do something with Megumi?"

"Something?"

"....I don't like it." Hiroko said without answering his question.

"Something...."

"Somehow, it's nothing but bad things happening lately."

"I guess so, huh...."

"Didn't the Ohtsuka Sawmill's son die? Just a while ago, Nakano-san's place seemed to behaving a funeral too."

"That right."

"The people in Yamairi died, to. ....This year it's been nothing but such things. What's going on?"

"Isn't it your imagination?" Shimizu said but it came out more bluntly than necessary. The truth was Shimizu thought so too. This year was odd. He was seeing too many funerals around. He couldn't help feeling like something not good was happening in the village right now. But, when Shimizu said as much, his colleagues at work said he was over-thinking it. Maeda who also lived in Shimo-Sotoba lost a daughter, and she became neurotic, they chastised, seeming worried. That might be the case, Shimizu himself thought.

"It seems the Yasumori Obaa-chan's moved. Moved out to live with her son, I heard. ...Bit by bit it's like the popular's decreasing."

Is that right, Shimizu answered. It felt like they were being left behind in a lurch.

"Come to think of it, Nara-san from the JA retired, too."

"Nara-san? But, he was still...."

"Seems he was sick. It seemed like he planned to hurry into retirement."

"I see.... that might not be too bad."

"Even if you say that. For those of us left behind, it's unbarable. What with employees not coming to work and all."

"Employees? Who?"

Shimizu provided the name of a female clerk who transferred to Sotoba. She had been employed there a long time, so Hiroko knew of her.

"Her? She isn't coming in?"

"Mm," Shimizu frowned. "This is just between us but it seems she vanished without a trace."

My, Hiroko said aloud. "What about her husband and child?"

Shimizu shook his head with a sigh. Hiroko was shocked, and aware of just how much envy she felt. It wasn't a strong enough emotion to call envy but it was something similar.

--How good it would be to throw away the present, to flee away towards the future.

From the house oppressed by silence, from the family with a hole in it. From she herself who had lost her daughter. And.

(....From this cursed village.)

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6

Toshio received notice of Mizuguchi's Ohkawa Shigeru's death at the usual time, early in the morning. September 19th, Monday. By the time he had hurried to the telephone, Shigeru had already died. Ohkawa Shigeru had been 33, one grade higher than Toshio, with 34 close at hand when he'd suddenly died.

Shigeru had been bedridden since three days prior, his breathing fizzling to a stop without anyone to care for him in the grey hours of the morning. When his family had come in the morning to try to wake him they finally noticed Shigeru was dead.

"To think that this could happen!" Shigeru's mother threw herself over the corpse sobbing. Toshio looked over that in irritation. Why, if he was ill, was he not made to go to the hospital, not brought into the hospital?

---Of course, he knew. Because it was over a weekend. It wasn't that Shigeru's parents weren't worried about their son. Nor were they indifferent to his health. Shigeru became far worse than his parents feared. At first, they couldn't think it was something to call the doctor out for on his day off. All the same, because they were worried for their son, they planned to bring him in first thing at the beginning of the week. And that wasn't soon enough. The illness did not give Shigeru until Monday.

It'd be better to open the hospital even on days off, Toshio knew. Those in the village were intimately familiar with Toshio. But that was why all the more they couldn't exploit him on his days off. There's no excuse for that, they thought, most considerably. They meant well--it was absolutely nothing but the best of intentions but for those patients braving this disease, the two days of the weekend, just those two days, were a fatal procrastination.

It wasn't just his patients. Toshio himself was inconvenienced by it. Every time he was called out for an examination it was of a corpse---and unable to even do an autopsy, he couldn't observe its progress or observe it, leaving him unable to determine the source of the disease. Anyway, saying that he needed to fill out a

death certificate, he asked about Shigeru's medical history, both parents medical history, his habits past and present, pushing with all his might for who he'd seen recently, where he went, if there was anything there that could have infected him but nobody but the man himself could know all that. If he could at least ask Shigeru himself. While he was still lucid.

Lately the death reports had stopped. It was an incredibly short break. And then in came Shigeru's death notification. It was possible this was a beginning. After a small break ended the peak was coming. The coming wave would probably be greater than the last one.

It would be good to open the hospital on the weekend too. He knew that. All the same, if he did decide to open the hospital, he would need staff. It wasn't as if he could tell his already busy staff to work any harder, and they weren't exactly surrounded left and right by places to try and recruit new staff from.

Toshio looked down at the Ohkawa husband and wife crumpled and crying, in a dark, somber mood.

Seishin received notice of Ohkawa Shigeru's death also at the usual time right after the morning services. Returning to the office for a short break Seishin and the others heard the phone ring and looked to each other. That a phone call in the morning was not a good thing was something all of them had come to feel in their bones this summer.

The one to take the call was Mitsuo, the one to say "again" in a small mumble was Tsurumi. Nobody else said a word beyond that.

When he went to the Ohkawa household in Mizuguchi for the bedside sutras, there unfolded the usual pathetic scene.

"If I'd known that it would come to this, I would have drug him to the hospital on Saturday!" His mother Norie broke down sobbing. "It was because he said himself that he was okay!"

What happened with Fuki---when Gotouda Shuuji died, was repeating itself here. His father Choutarou and Norie both looked to have rounded and become smaller too. Shigeru wasn't yet married. Seishin didn't know whether he should say that the two having no daughter-in-law or grandchildren was fortunate or unfortunate.

For Ohkawa Choutarou and Norie, their son Shigeru's death was a disaster on par with their own deaths. It was a death so sudden they couldn't even imagine it in their dreams. The shock and significance was likely immeasurable to them, and yet to Seishin this was nothing more than another stereotypical scene he'd seen repeat so many times he felt nauseous this summer.

And so he found himself failing to ask indirectly about Ohkawa Shigeru's latest movements, too. Either way it there wasn't going to be any visible point of connection, he'd sensed from the beginning in his heart. ---And, practically speaking, he couldn't find any point of contact between Shigeru and the dead to now.

(Is this going to keep happening.... for how long?)

Wondering to himself in that dark and somber mood he'd fallen into, Seishin asked suddenly whether Shigeru had retired from work just before he died.

Norie made a face as if she didn't understand why she was being asked such a thing. "Of course not."

That's right, Seishin said with a wry internal smile. Yes, there was no significance to that. It was only something he'd noticed as an observer. As if not fully understanding his self-derisive silence, Norie piled on more words.

"He could not have. This morning, when we had notified his workplace in Mizobe, they didn't say anything about that."

"No, pardon me. It was just bothering me a bit, I am truly sorry to have troubled you over it."

Seishin apologized thusly and said that he would see them again at the all night vigil, then took his leave of the Ohkawa house. The next time he visited the Ohkawa house was a little before the all night vigil; sitting aside in the tatami room Seishin, as usual, listened to the grieved voices of condolence callers for the dead and the jumbled conversations passing through. Fixedly in wait through this, amongst the faces of the mourners he saw Ohkawa Tomio's face. Come to think of it the master of the Ohkawa Liquor shop didn't have strong blood relations with Ohkawa Shigeru but he remembered that there was some connection.

"Ah, it's the Junior Monk. You are workin' hard as usual. To think I'm meeting you at it today again after yesterday."

"It must be hard on you as well, Boss."

"That's two relatives now. Honestly, man." Ohkawa gave a sigh and with a bow of his head returned to his relatives. The main mourners, the Ohkawa couple, sat deeply discouraged, receiving the visiting mourners.

"My condolences for your sudden loss." said a man in the prime of his life in a dark suit, behind him many likewise in mourning clothes in waiting. "When I had been told, I was surprised. I am sure that you must be depressed. If at tomorrow's funeral there is any way that I may be of service, please do not hesitate to ask."

To this Choutarou and Norie both nodded in silence.

"Thank you very much. ...Those of the neighborhood will do everything, so, your feelings alone are enough."

Is that so, the young man sighed. "Even so, it really was sudden. Was there anything the matter with Shigeru-kun?"

No, Norie said dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief, shaking her head.

"Is that so? ....Ah, it's just, everyone," the man said turning back towards the number of people behind him. "had thought: Ah, Shigeki-kun probably quit suddenly for treatment or recuperation."

Norie's face lifted, the eyes she had been sobbing out blinking. Choutarou too suddenly started to stand as if pricked. Seishin too took another, more serious look at the man's face.

"Uhm... What might you be talking about?" Norie crushed the handkerchief in her hands. This time it was the man who blinked as if bewildered.

"No, uhm. Last week on Friday, Shigeru-kun took his retirement leave, and at that time he had said that it was for personal reasons but we were thinking that it was surely because he was sick and that he had quit in order to focus on recovery, we thought." The man said, looking at Choutarou and Norie's flabbergasted faces. "Uhm.... Did you not hear about it? He had quit, Shigeru-

kun did. And very suddenly. He said that he had his reasons and that he was giving up any rights on inheriting anything and all of this and that, so he had to quit, by the end of the day and that was that." The man looked at the number of people behind him--colleagues, likely---as if seeking support. "He was very forceful, for Shigeru-kun, so we were saying he really must have had quite the circumstances, and then when we had received notice of his death, that must have been it, we.... uhm, that is..."

"That---that can't," Norie was at a loss for words and then looked towards Seishin who was waiting his turn in the side tatami room. "That boy, he didn't say anything about---"

They looked at each other in bewilderment. Perhaps overhearing the conversation, the people around again exchanged looks.

Sinking down to the floor, Choutarou who had stood up was again seated. "I don't know anymore.... what's what. ---Why, such a thing."

And at such a loss for words, he began a fit of crying.

Seishin, still seated, fell as if he were thrown into the middle of an absurd play.

Shimizu Ryuuji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, and Ohkawa Shigeru. Each of them were young men who worked out of town. Who suddenly died. Dying was no longer odd, not in this village anymore. ----But.

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Chapter Links

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6

We have no cultural notes again this chapter, and discussions in the comment sections had turned towards inconsistent verb tense in the translations of Ono's other work, Ghost Hunt. In English narrative fiction, short of certain situations which we'll detail, this is seen as an unprofessional error. It's excusable and common enough in conversational English. In Japanese, it's the historical present that is not as common in conversation, usually replaced with the infinitive, but tense switching does occur very frequently in narrative text. For the very long run down on why I'm translating Shiki in standard consistent past tense narration, consider

this monster of an essay.

It has an excerpt from chapter 5 -6 keeping the original

Japanese tenses.